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FORESTS OF THE NIGHT

by L. H. G. HARRIS

By the same Author:

DOUBLE IMAGE
FRONTIER OF FEAR
DEAD HAND

H325-15

Forests of the Night

by I. R. G. Hart

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CHAPTER I

RETROSPECTIVE

ONE DAY BETTY WHITE HAD GONE TO TEA WITH Maurice and Arthur Forbes, and it had come on to rain, so they had gone indoors and were playing at clumps. They were all too old, or at any rate too sophisticated, for the game, and the things they thought of were horribly ingenious.

Betty thought of the grub which turned into the last fly that Robert Bruce's spider ever ate; then Arthur thought of the smallest pip in the largest apple ever borne by the tree from which they picked the apple which William Tell shot off the head of his son. This was disputed by Betty on the grounds that he probably didn't. Arthur would have taken the snub submissively, but Maurice came to his brother's defence.

'Well how do you know Bruce ever saw a spider?'

'Must have some time or other,' Betty retorted witheringly.

'Well, now it's Maurice's turn to think of something,' Arthur put in. He was no good at the kind of verbal jugglery that always followed disputes of this kind. He couldn't, like the other two, think promptly of something that sounded all right to say, even if it had no real bearing on the point in question.

'All right,' said Maurice, 'I've thought.'

'Is it animal?' Betty began.

'Yes—sort of.'

'How sort of? Do you mean partly?'

'No, not partly. Just sort of. *Kind of* animal you know, and kind of not.'

'Is it a vegetable?' asked Arthur, who had been thinking of something else:

Betty was on the point of rebuking his inattention, but Maurice prevented her by answering.

'Yes—sort of.'

'You mean,' Betty objected 'that it's partly animal and partly vegetable. Like a wooden brush with bristles.'

'No, I don't. Sort of animal and sort of vegetable. Kind of both and kind of neither. And the same all through. Not partly one thing and partly another.'

'Oh, I see—some low form of life.'

Betty was a great reader of such books as *Wonders of Nature*, or *The Marvels of the Universe*, which she found on the shelves of her uncle's library. Her elders encouraged her in this, not realising that she had learnt enough about such things as internal parasites to frighten a more imaginative child into fits.

'Is it a sponge?' she asked.

'A sea anemone?' from Arthur.

'A measles germ?'

'Any kind of germ?'

'A diatom?'

'That green stuff that lives in dirty water?'

And so on, until at last they had to give it up.

‘It’s my mind, thinking of those laurel bushes outside the window,’ Maurice told them.

‘If it’s you, it’s animal,’ Betty declared dogmatically.

‘I said my mind; not me.’

‘Well that’s part of you, isn’t it?’

‘No it’s not me exactly; it’s my think—I mean my thought—and my thought was those bushes and the bushes are vegetable.’

‘You’re supposed to think of *something*,’ Betty objected, ‘and a *think* isn’t a thing.’

‘Well, it’s not nothing, so it must be something.’

‘It isn’t animal and it isn’t vegetable. It’s just abstract, and that’s as good as nothing.’ Betty dogmatised.

‘No, it isn’t,’ Maurice insisted. ‘It’s *me*. The think is my mind and my mind is me, and when I think of the bushes my think is the bushes, so when I think of my mind thinking of the bushes the thinking is animal because it’s me, and vegetable because it’s the bushes.’

He was growing quite heated in his effort to express his rather abstruse point of view.

‘What awful rot,’ the practical Betty contradicted him. ‘At that rate you are vegetable because you are the bushes, and the bushes are animal because they are you.’

‘No, it isn’t that at all, I didn’t think of me or of the bushes, I thought of the thought I had of the bushes.’

'Yes,' Betty mocked him cheerfully, 'and your thought is you and your thought is the bushes, and things that are equal to the same thing are equal to one another, and therefore you are the bushes and the bushes are you.'

'I say, let's go out again,' suggested Arthur, whose attention as usual had wandered. 'It's nearly stopped raining.'

'I don't think it was fair,' Betty maintained. 'No one could possibly guess that, because it wasn't anything real at all.'

'Oh, let's stop jawing, there's the sun coming out.'

So they went out and played in the garden again; but Maurice was not really satisfied. There had been something he was trying to say, and he had not succeeded in saying it. He kept thinking of ways it might have been better expressed, but yet he knew it would be practically impossible, whatever he said, to make Betty consent to understand him. As for Arthur, he did not really care much whether he understood him or not.

Betty's father had died almost before she could remember, and she and her mother had gone to live with her grandmother in a big old-fashioned house in the country, not very far from the little village of Ashton. They lived there all three together, and Uncle Clifford came to stay with them when he was in England, which was not very often.

All her life Betty had accepted the existence and

behaviour of Uncle Clifford as young people do accept the elders of their family.

His comings and goings, his character and habits had been discussed in her presence long before she was old enough to understand; so that she took it all as an established institution and did not realise what a problem he had been to his parents and relations until they gave up attempting to deal with him and decided to let him go his own way.

To her he was the one authentic hero of romance—a kind of pledge that Captain Cook and Sir Walter Raleigh really had existed. She knew that he had travelled in some of the strangest and wildest parts of the world. He had been in places where no white man had been before, and he had brought back wonderful plants and insects that no one else had ever seen.

Actually, in daily life, he was kind, ordinary, and rather shy. He treated Betty respectfully like a grown-up lady even when she was quite a little girl; but Betty never saw him quite as he was, but always with a background of strange forests and rivers, and a halo of adventures which she felt sure he must have had, although she was very hazy about the details of them.

When she was about six years old her mother was taken ill in some mysterious fashion. At first Betty had not been told much about it, but, as almost always happens, she had gathered more than she was intended to know from chance words and looks of her elders and from the tense, expectant atmos-

phere of the household. Later there had been doctors and operations, all very terrifying and important, and at last mother had gone away to London and died in a nursing home.

Uncle Clifford was in England at the time, and Agnes, who had been his nurse and could say what she liked, declared that it was time he married and settled down and stayed at home for good.

Apparently Uncle Clifford thought so too, for soon afterwards he was engaged to Leila Forbes, a pretty, fair-haired girl, who lived with her parents and her two little brothers, out along the road on the other side of the village.

Betty was thrilled, for the Forbes were rich, they had a beautiful house and garden and a motor car, which, in those days before the war, was still something of a rarity; Mr. Forbes owned most of the land in the neighbourhood, and the children had a pony of their own, and heaps of pets, and lovely things to play with.

Maurice and Arthur were equally delighted because of their romantic admiration for Uncle Clifford's adventurous life, and their resolve to accompany him on his journeys when once they were grown up.

But Agnes must have been hard to please; for Betty overheard her grumbling about it, saying that Mr. Clifford ought to know better at his time of life than to think of marrying a girl of eighteen or thereabouts, seeing that he was old enough to be her father.

And again, it seemed as if someone had agreed with Agnes, for before long the engagement was broken off, and Uncle Clifford went abroad again, leaving Betty alone with her grandmother.

Two years later Leila married someone else and went away, but the boys remained, and they were the only friends Betty had of anything like her own age. In fact, after her mother's death they were almost the only friends she had at all outside the household, for her grandmother was old and did not care much about meeting people.

Then one day Uncle Clifford wrote from the ends of the earth announcing that he was married and was about to return home bringing a wife with him.

Betty's first intimation of this was that one morning she surprised her grandmother crying over a letter.

'What is the matter, Granny?' she asked anxiously, supposing that someone must be dead or very ill, for she believed that was the only thing that made grown-up people cry.

Then Granny had tried to pretend that she had not been crying at all, and had explained that Uncle Clifford was married—which surely, thought Betty, was a *good* thing to be.

It would all have been very puzzling if she had been of an age to suppose that the behaviour of one's elders needed or was capable of any rational explanation.

Later Uncle Clifford had arrived with his beautiful wife.

'Your Aunt Penelope,' Granny had called her, but it had never been possible to think of Penelope as an aunt. She was always far more like an elder sister, or some kind of compound of that and a princess in a fairy tale.

She was dark and slender and very lovely, with bright eyes like a bird's, and a warm, soft colour in face. She spoke English perfectly—just a trifle too perfectly to be quite natural. There was no accent that one could put a name to, but her sentences were sometimes a little formal and stilted, and she pronounced her words carefully, like one not speaking her own language. Betty loved her at once for her beauty and her gentle kindness.

Only she knew that there was more about her than that—somehow more about her than there had ever been about Leila Forbes or any of the girls and women Agnes had wondered why Mr. Clifford didn't think of marrying. One was tempted to dream romances about her—to weave stories of how Uncle Clifford had saved her from cannibals, or alligators, or pirates; whereas you couldn't imagine anyone, not even Uncle Clifford, saving Leila Forbes from a cannibal. She was such a careful, adequate, tidy kind of girl, she never forgot her handkerchief, never got her dress torn or her shoes muddy. It was impossible to picture her in any position from which she might need saving.

Penelope, on the other hand, was impetuous and swift. She never stopped to think about her clothes if there was anything she wanted to do. She was the

kind of woman that jumps into the water to save someone else without even reflecting that she herself can't swim. One could imagine her in any kind of danger or difficulty.

And besides, one had a sense of background, of something romantic, strange, untold about her. This, no doubt, was really largely due to her colouring, for Betty herself was fair, so were Maurice and Arthur, and anything darker than an ordinary English brown was uncommon in her experience.

One day, when she was sitting unnoticed in a corner of the drawing-room, she heard her grandmother and Uncle Clifford talking about Penelope. They were talking seriously and affectionately, and in what struck the child as a very grown-up fashion.

She was, as it happened, far more occupied with her dolls than with their conversation, but phrases remained in her mind although at the time they meant little to her.

Uncle Clifford was doing most of the talking.

'Twelve years ago—both parents dead—I knew the father. Such a pretty child. So I took her on with me and left her at—(the name of some place, Betty did not catch it)—to be looked after and educated. They've done it well, I must say. Yes—I paid for her education and her keep. Well—one couldn't leave her about——'

Granny had murmured something sadly, something like, 'why didn't you tell me about her sooner?'

‘Tell you? But there’s been nothing to tell. I just thought I’d have a look as I was going that way. Oh, of course I’ve been hearing from her and from them all the time.’

Again Granny had spoken, quite inaudibly this time.

‘I couldn’t have married an English woman; they expect too much of one—Penelope—she’ll be content to stay at home. That’s why I call her that. —Oh yes, she had another name, but I didn’t like it.’

‘Her people?’ Granny had murmured interrogatively.

‘Never saw the mother. The father was half Irish and half Spanish—or so he said, I wouldn’t care to swear to it.—Probably just his way of putting it.—Well—you see—I was *there* and he asked me to look after her. There was no one else—He was dying——’

That at least was the conversation that Betty had reconstructed on thinking back over the matter with a maturer understanding. At the time, she sat playing with her dolls, while their talk flowed round and past her. She attached no special significance to what they said. She would probably have forgotten it completely if Granny had not caught sight of her, and, with a glance and a murmur, indicated her presence to Uncle Clifford.

‘It’s all right,’ he whispered, ‘she’s not listening.’

But all the same they broke off their talk and called to her to know what she was playing at.

It was that phrase, 'It's all right, she's not listening,' that had fixed the scraps she caught in Betty's mind; for it gave them a personal relation to herself, making them definitely something she was not supposed to hear, instead of merely the kind of thing that grown-ups do talk about. Why she was not supposed to hear it did not occur to her to wonder, or even whether there was something still more unfit for her that had passed by.

She never spoke of the matter to anyone, just as she never told how Granny had cried over Uncle Clifford's letter; and since she did not realise what misgivings there had been in the family, it did not strike her that Penelope turned out more satisfactory than anyone expected.

Next time Uncle Clifford went off on his travels Penelope stayed behind with Betty and her grandmother; and when the grandmother died Betty and Penelope went on living together in the same old house where Uncle Clifford joined them whenever he was in England.

They lived very quietly. Uncle Clifford was accustomed to spend so much on his travels that Penelope could hardly have run the house with what he allowed her if it had not been that Betty had money of her own, and often paid more than her share of the housekeeping. Even so, there was nothing over for improvements—barely enough for necessary repairs.

Betty, meanwhile, was growing up, a normal, healthy kind of girl, rather old-fashioned by

reason of her circumstances, rather romantic, by reason of her loneliness and the type of novel which her elders thought it suitable for her to read, and intensely obstinate, by reason of her natural disposition.

This last quality, however, was generally unsuspected; for she was small and slender, she had fluffy, light brown hair and blue eyes, a charmingly pink-and-white complexion and a quiet, reserved, unobtrusive manner; so that it took a close and continuous observer to note the tenacity with which she held to her own opinions. It is only one who has tried to discourage a kitten from crawling into a certain drawer, or climbing up a certain piece of furniture, who would ever dream of saying, 'As obstinate as a kitten' instead of 'as obstinate as a mule.'

Things changed very little. Mr. Forbes died, and Mrs. Forbes grew gradually more and more of an invalid. That Betty would one day marry one of the Forbes boys was a fact of which the people most concerned were the last to remain unaware.

When Maurice did propose it was almost in the same breath in which he told her that her uncle had at last agreed to take him with him on his next expedition, and that Mrs. Forbes had consented to his going.

Betty accepted him unhesitatingly. She did think it rather a pity that he should be going away, but it did not occur to her to raise any objection. Even if it had she would probably not have done so; it

had been his ambition for so long, and he was so full of enthusiasm now.

‘And we’ll be married as soon as I come back—in the summer,’ he had said.

That was this summer—last summer—the summer that had just gone by.

CHAPTER II

THE LANGUAGE OF FLOWERS

AMONG THE THINGS THAT BETTY WAS ACCUSTOMED to do about the house and garden there was one that she hated more than all the rest, and that was picking and arranging flowers; for there was nothing else that marked so unmistakably and so inexorably the passage of time and the change of the seasons.

It was like a slow, orderly procession. Early spring when flowers were scarce and small and precious—aconites, snowdrops, crocuses, scillas—then a rush of daffodils, primroses, narcissi, merging into a positive embarrassment of tulips, wall flowers, forget-me-nots, lilacs, lilies. Then summer—delphiniums, carnations, roses, and a wonderful show of annuals—late summer with Japanese anemones, golden rod, sunflowers——

It was an early autumn this year, but what of that? Summer was over, there was no denying it, among the tall, dim, Michaelmas daisies, the dahlias, cosmos, chrysanthemums, and the red leaves of the ampelopsis. Soon the frost would blacken even these last brave flowers. Already it had touched the nasturtiums, turning their succulent green to something that looked like stringy boiled cabbage. And then it would be winter! Winter over again.

By a natural transition, her thoughts passed to that cold moonlit winter night when she had woken suddenly at the sound of a terrible cry and sat up in bed listening—shivering. She remembered how she had waited motionless a second or two, not knowing whether she had dreamt or heard the sound that woke her, whether it was inside or outside the house. . . . Whether perhaps it was the screech of an owl or the howl of a dog.

Then it came again, and in a flash she was flying bare-footed down the passage towards Penelope's room.

Cry after cry it sounded as she ran along the uneven passages of the old, rambling country house. Cry after cry—like nothing she had ever heard or imagined before. It was not an involuntary scream of pain or terror; still less was it a call for help, that seeks to be heard and to attract attention. It was instinctive and unchecked—the expression of something wholehearted and fundamental.

So she analysed it now, looking back; but at the time she did not stop to think; she heard it and she ran. There was not a moment to collect her thoughts to wonder what it meant or to consider what she expected to find; only as she flew along the passage towards Penelope's room her heart was beating furiously, and her breath came hard.

She remembered the moonlight, the swaying white window curtains as she threw open the door, and Penelope sitting upright in her white nightgown, small and slim on the large four post bed, her arms bent across her face under her long, dark hair.

‘Penelope—darling!’—she remembered the clutch of amazement and alarm that forced her to speak in a voice that wasn’t her own, ‘What is the matter?’

Penelope uncovered her face, raising her elbows above her head, while her hands remained hidden in her hair.

‘He’s dead, Betty,’ she wailed, ‘he’s dead. Your Uncle Clifford is dead, child. Why don’t you cry? Why don’t you cry? He’s dead.’

‘Pen, dear,’ Betty had expostulated, uncannily thrilled, but trying hard to speak and think reasonably, ‘you’ve been dreaming; do, for goodness sake, wake up.’

She climbed up on to the bed beside Penelope, who clutched and embraced her, sobbing loudly, while she tried in vain to reason and protest.

‘Pen—darling—wake up; You’re dreaming!—Uncle Clifford is miles and miles away. How can you have heard that he is dead? There’s been no cable, no letter. You just dreamt it. Do wake up, dearest, and be sensible. Do try and think how you know and you will see it’s all nonsense.

‘Listen dear, we were talking about him last night, and you were saying yourself we couldn’t possibly hear from him just yet. You must have dreamt that there was a letter or a cable—but there hasn’t been—really there hasn’t, Pen. Do try to remember how you think you heard, and then you can’t help seeing that you *haven’t*.

‘Don’t you remember his last letter? He said not to worry if we didn’t hear from him for some time, that the next we should hear from him would be his

cable from Kubor Sayang, and that—you know that hasn't come yet.'

So she reasoned, so she argued, feeling all the while her own good sense horribly overborne by Penelope's emotional certainty. For Penelope did not answer her objections, Penelope found no fault with her reasoning, she only repeated between sobs and cries, 'He's dead, I tell you, he's dead.'

The servants had been roused by the noise. Agnes came in, but she proved as powerless as Betty.

Morning came, and in despair they sent for the doctor. He counselled sedatives, and declared that it was useless to reason or argue with Penelope for the time being. The truth was that he was as much puzzled as anyone; for Penelope was a young, healthy and seemingly well balanced woman; a foreigner, of course, and excitable, but apparently quite normal up till now.

'She has probably been a great deal more anxious than anyone has realised,' he declared, and talked vaguely of nervous strain; then passed to soothing generalities and comfort for the terrified Betty.

Next day Penelope was prostrate with grief that could not have been more real if she had actually seen her husband dead. She lay exhausted on her bed, and it was with the greatest difficulty that she could be persuaded to eat anything.

Days passed and she grew calmer, but nothing could shake her fixed conviction that she was a widow.

To Betty's utter dismay she insisted on dressing in the deepest mourning, and telling everyone that

Clifford was dead. Betty was always having to send word afterwards and explain that it was not so. She did not find it at all an easy thing to explain. She did not want people to think that Penelope was mad or that she was a liar, and it was hard to find any third explanation for her conduct.

‘Soon we shall have a cable from him,’ she comforted herself. ‘Soon we shall hear that he is out of the jungle again and on his way home, and then Pen will see that she is making a mistake.’

That was last January. All through the winter one was expecting a cable that never came.

Letters arrived, with the ironic, imperturbable persistence of long-distance mails, but they brought no real comfort, for they had all been written before that terrible night.

They simply described a series of small mishaps and annoyances which had induced them to put off the start of their journey through the jungle to Kubor Sayang.

‘It doesn’t look as if we should be back as soon as we expected,’ Maurice had written. Clearly he had no say in the matter; it was Uncle Clifford who settled all that. Betty refused to let herself think that really Maurice might have insisted.

‘I couldn’t marry an Englishwoman; they expect too much of one.’ The phrase visited her mind. She knew it was true that she would expect more of Maurice than Penelope had ever extracted from Uncle Clifford.

Then came a letter. ‘It really does look as though we were starting this time at last,’ and a renewal of

the warning that there would be no news for a while.

'Well now,' thought Betty, 'they really have started. Before long there'll be a cable to say they have arrived.'

Instead another letter for Penelope from Clifford and one for Betty from Maurice.

Clifford wrote, rather shortly and hurriedly, that they had started, and that he was sending this letter back by hand. He had decided on a change of route ; his reasons for doing so, he said, were too long to explain in writing.

'We shall be going a much longer way,' he wrote, 'and I can't tell at all how long it may take, so don't worry if you don't hear for some time.'

That had always been Uncle Clifford's way. He hated to commit himself to a date. 'Don't worry,' he said, and assumed that it was as easy to obey the words as he found it to write them. Betty began to realise something of what her grandparents had endured from him.

Maurice did not say much, but between the lines Betty gathered that he was not too well pleased at this change of plan. 'Of course Clifford is used to doing things by himself,' he said, 'and he's convinced that this is what he wants to do.'

Those two letters had been the last. So Betty hated the flowers, because they marked the passage of time.

Snowdrops—crocuses—daffodils——

Betty suggested that one should write or cable to the Resident or the head of the police or something

'It is no use,' Penelope answered gently, 'but I will write if you wish.'

She wrote to Mr. McKay, the District Officer at Kuala Besar, where Clifford had last been heard of. Betty secretly cabled to the same address. The answer to her cable was simply a confirmation of her uncle's last letter.

Clifford White and Maurice Forbes had left on such a date, their destination was so and so.

Tulips, double cherry, irises, lilies.

The early summer brought an answer to Penelope's letter, but no fresh news. The District Officer had heard of Clifford's change of plan; he was making inquiries, but assured Penelope that there was no real cause for alarm.

Pæonies—gladiolus——

Penelope continued to correspond with Mr. McKay, though, 'This is a farce,' she said to Betty, 'he died last winter.' Her correspondent no longer declared that there was no real cause for alarm, only protested that nothing could be done that was being left undone.

Zinnias—dahlias—elms chrome yellow, beeches venetian red. A last hot blaze of colour, gorgeous and pitiful in the lovely autumn light. Betty would not allow herself to despair, scarcely to admit that she was anxious.

And yet the letters that came gave more and more cause for uneasiness. They were by now long overdue at their altered destination, and no trace of them could be found.

Presently it appeared that some, at any rate, of the

Sakai who had accompanied them at the start had left them, though why they had done so it was impossible to make out.

Penelope took all this very calmly. To her the worst was already an accepted fact; the details of her correspondence with McKay she found merely tedious and distasteful. But to Betty, passing time and recurrent letters were all part of a gathering threatening cloud that darkened the whole sky, but of which she obstinately strove to deny the existence.

And now the Michaelmas daisies, the evening primrose, the gradual withering of green things—everywhere signs of dwindling vitality—the sad drift of wind and leaves and rain. An early autumn as it happened that year, September that was more like November.

‘It will soon be winter again,’ Betty could not escape the voice of the garden. ‘Winter is coming—and spring—and summer. Winter—spring—summer, all over again.’

All through those uneasy, troubled days a kind of friendship, a kind of alliance, had grown up between Arthur Forbes and Betty. They sought each other’s advice and help in the handling of their respective problems, he of his mother, she of Penelope. They came to be very frank with one another. There positively wasn’t time to be anything else; and their long acquaintance flowered into an unemotional intimacy, a mutual confidence, that was a great help to both of them.

Mrs. Forbes was the one person for whom Penelope had been willing in some degree to modify

her behaviour and appearance. That had been a struggle, but Betty had won the day. It was Arthur who had put her up to it.

'I say, the Mater says won't you and Pen come to tea, but she'll simply have a fit if she sees Pen got up like a funeral procession.'

'Oh help!' Betty had murmured inelegantly.

'Can't she drop it, just for a day?' Arthur suggested.

Betty had promised to try.

'But Pen's just about the most obstinate thing on earth,' she had added, to which Arthur replied quite crudely, 'Well she'd better not come at all than come looking like that.'

'Besides,' Betty went on, 'hasn't everybody heard of our little ways? I thought the whole village talked of nothing but us.'

Arthur shook his head. Mrs. Forbes was an invalid, she went nowhere and heard nothing except what her few tactful and carefully chosen guests happened to tell her—certainly nothing that could increase her inevitable anxiety about her son, 'and even if she had,' Arthur pointed out, 'you really have to *see* Pen to get the full force of the joke.'

'Yes, she's *rather* incredible, isn't she?' Betty sighed in answer.

There had followed a contest between Betty and Penelope, and the only victory that Betty had ever won over Penelope's determination to appear the widow she felt herself to be.

There was no mistake about her appearance. No one could possibly imagine for a moment that she

wore black merely because it was the fashion, or because she happened to think it suited her. Her black veil was a smooth cascade, slanting outward to the width of her shoulders and falling below her waist, her high collar was stiffened with whalebone up to her ears and edged with a pleated frill of black net, so that her pretty, oval, alert, and warmly coloured face, with its high cheek-bones and dark eyes, showed detached, like a mask hung on a curtain.

‘Pen, dear,’ Betty began nervously, ‘you’ll change—won’t you? It’s to-day, you know, we are going to tea with Mrs. Forbes.’

‘Change?’ Penelope queried in her sweet, careful voice. ‘But why, dear? Am I not tidy?’

Betty had found it difficult to explain, difficult to re-open a subject that had been talked over so often between them.

‘It’s not that—but really after all we don’t know—not exactly *know*—that Uncle Clifford is dead.’

‘But I *do* know, dear,’ Penelope had insisted in her obstinately reasonable fashion, ‘I have known for months.’

‘But that isn’t knowing,’ Betty argued, ‘that’s only a feeling you have.’

‘Feeling? knowing?’ Penelope had a momentary air of being bewildered by the English language. ‘Yes—a feeling. I feel certain, I feel I know—I *do* know.’

Betty felt there was little to be gained from pursuing the philosophical side of the matter, in defining knowledge or in examining whether, and in

what manner, it differed from feeling. She shifted her ground artfully.

‘But all the same, won’t you change—just for to-day? Please do. You see, Mrs. Forbes has been so ill, and we don’t want to upset her.’

Nothing on earth was ever more reasonable than Penelope in her obstinate moods.

‘But, dear,’ she answered gently, ‘my husband is dead, I know nothing of Maurice Forbes. Very much I hope for your sake that he is alive. My dress need not alarm his mother, it is not for him I wear it.’

‘Oh but please——’ Betty pleaded. ‘Don’t you see just the sight of you will give her a shock? Don’t you see that she’ll think—before she has time to think sensibly—that you have had bad news, not just a presentiment?’

‘See her first then, dear,’ Penelope suggested, ‘and explain that this is my caprice.’

Betty began to coax.

‘Pen, darling—do *please*—just to please me——’ A personal appeal of this kind rarely failed with Penelope.

‘My dear, to please you I would do it, but I have no coloured things left. Some I gave away and some I have had dyed.’

Then Betty remembered a pretty new dress which Penelope had given her, and which she had not yet had altered.

‘Rather gay for the occasion, is it not?’ Penelope objected. ‘Mrs. Forbes will think me over-dressed! But no matter—I will wear it!’ Then a fresh

objection struck her—the drive through the village in their open pony trap. She would be seen and noticed and commented on. Betty suggested a black coat and hat, but they could find nothing suitable. Finally it had been agreed that Arthur Forbes should fetch them in his closed motor, so that no one could see how Penelope was dressed, and since then that had always been the ritual when Penelope went to tea with Mrs. Forbes.

CHAPTER III

A WIDOW BY CONVICTION

THERE WAS, OF COURSE, NO SPECIAL REASON WHY Betty, of all the household, should be the one to do the flowers. It might just as well have been Penelope or one of the servants; but Betty was not given to pampering her emotions. She believed that her distaste for this particular occupation was unreasonable, and her actions at least were under the control of reason, though her feelings might not be.

To-day her feelings were even less so than usual; she was full of uneasiness and presentiments.

‘Go back to the house,’ something kept whispering inside her. ‘Go back to the house; you will find news waiting for you!’

‘Idiot,’ she replied firmly to herself. ‘You know perfectly well, that this is nonsense and imagination. And I’m not going back to the house until I have finished cutting the flowers. So there!’

Her secret uneasiness made her all the fiercer and sterner with herself. She would not yield to fancies and impulses. She would not believe in dreams and feelings and premonitions, whether her own or Penelope’s. She would believe in nothing until she had good, sufficient, satisfying reason for believing it. She would trust nothing that came without evidence.

In this she was scarcely logical, for she continued to assert that she believed Uncle Clifford and Maurice were all right and would come back soon, without reflecting that she had no more evidence of that than Penelope had of her husband's death. She would probably have been far less positive, far less militant, had it not been that she needed this armour as a protection against the quiet and unreasoning certainty of Penelope, who continued to say simply, 'Clifford is dead. I don't know how I know it, but I do know it, why do you all want me to pretend to be in doubt when I am certain?'

'And what about Maurice?' Betty had asked her once. 'Is he dead, too?'

She had asked sarcastically, expecting Penelope to be annoyed at the question, but she answered quite naturally, 'I don't know—how can I tell?'

'I hope not, Betty, dear,' she had added affectionately, and Betty had felt a beast because she had not answered the question in the spirit in which it had been asked.

'I won't believe until I know,' she told herself, 'and I *won't know* until I have some reason for knowing.'

'Go back to the house,' came the voice of her other self. 'Go back to the house. Go back to the house, something has happened.' To obey that voice would be to behave like Penelope—a thing she was determined not to do. She could not silence it, but she could utterly refuse to be influenced by it. She would not go in; she would not hurry. She even loitered a little after she had gathered all the flowers she wanted, simply in order to prove to her own satisfaction

that she was a reasonable being and understood the laws of evidence.

But yet she could not help the way her heart thumped as she came in, or the queer, sinking, clutching sensation which she felt inside.

Her words and actions and her voluntary thoughts might be under the control of reason, but somehow her inside was not. Her blood and her stomach persisted in believing and asserting that she was on the very edge of something momentous, and she could not order and discipline them as she could her arms and legs and the expression of her face.

Nothing. Nothing at all. Was she relieved or disappointed? Neither, she told herself; it was just what she had expected.

Nothing. A servant girl coming downstairs from the bedrooms. Old Agnes waiting to help her with the flowers. Just exactly as she had known and expected.

‘Nothing come while I have been in the garden?’ Betty asked.

(Of course it hadn’t, she would have been told, someone would have brought it her.)

‘No, Miss,’ said Agnes, ‘nothing, and I think the postman’s gone by now.’

(The postman—well, he wasn’t of much account, for by no possibility could there be a mail letter to-day. Not that the mail mattered much either, for the first news would undoubtedly be by cable.)

Tall vases for the hall, bold autumn flowers. Masses of colour freely grouped and held high.

'They are touched with frost, already,' she said as she arranged them, 'we shan't have many more now.'

'Winter seems to be coming early this year,' said Agnes. 'We generally have flowers right on into November, sometimes up to Christmas.'

They arranged the flowers together, as they did every day, and presently Agnes began to talk.

Ever since that terrible night in January she and Betty had been in open alliance against Penelope's wild moods and fancies. They formed a kind of League of Self-control and Sturdy British Common Sense. (Not that they gave it that or any other name, only they did both feel that they were sound, sensible people, and must hold together and support one another.) This was the moment when they exchanged confidences, and when Agnes opened her heart and aired her views of life.

No dramatist ever understood the art of preparation better than Agnes.

'The mistress she asked me to help her carry down some of Mr. Clifford's books,' she began, with an artistic and well-chosen air of casual detachment.

'But whatever for? Uncle Clifford's books?' Betty asked, just as was intended she should.

'Well, she said it was no use them staying there doing no good to nobody,' Agnes went on with the same impartial air. 'She said Mr. Clifford he would rather someone had them, and she said presently she'd be doing the same with his clothes.'

'Oh, I do wish she wouldn't!' Betty exclaimed.

'And so do *I* wish she wouldn't,' Agnes agreed emphatically. 'It don't seem right somehow. I don't

believe we are meant to know things till we *do* know them. It's like fortune-telling and that, a thing I never did hold with—besides being most misleading. God never meant us to meet our troubles until in His own good time they fall upon us. And then, what I say is, He'll give us strength to bear them, but not if we go poking them out before He means us to have them. And always a chance they may never happen at all."

'Well, I won't believe it till I know it,' Betty declared stoutly. 'Something has happened to delay them or they have changed their minds again and gone another way.'

'That's likely enough,' Agnes assented.

'If they had been dead someone would have found them by now,' Betty went on, happily ignorant of the conditions of the search. 'Uncle Cliff *couldn't* have been dead that night she said he was because they hadn't had time then to get really far from the route they had planned, so that someone *must* have found them in all this time they've been hunting. I'm sure for some reason they had to go a different way. I daresay they'll turn up presently in quite a different place—rather annoyed to hear that anyone has been anxious or has been looking for them.'

'That's right, Miss, you keep your spirits up,' Agnes encouraged her. Somehow Betty did not find the remark as cheering as it was meant to be.

'I suppose it's being a foreigner,' Agnes went on speculatively. 'I suppose they are always a bit more excitable-like, and ready to take on.'

‘Oh I don’t know! But I do know I won’t believe that Maurice and Uncle Cliff are dead until I have some proof.’

‘That’s right, Miss Betty, I’m thankful you don’t wake up screaming in the night or having feelings and presentiments.’ Betty laughed. ‘Oh, Agnes, I do,’ she confessed, ‘I’m not as sensible as you want to make me out. I don’t wake up screaming—at least I haven’t done it yet—but feelings and presentiments—any number of them. Scores of them every day, good and bad and all contradictory. I should never get anywhere if I stopped to think about all my feelings and presentiments.’

‘I had one just now out in the garden that I should find news waiting when I came in. But I remember all the other times I’ve had them and nothing has come of it. It’s all nonsense. Just nerves. I have them, but I don’t attend.’

‘That’s what I mean,’ declared Agnes triumphantly. ‘That really is what I call sense.’

‘Oh I am glad you call it that!’ Betty put in half laughing.

‘Yes, Miss Betty, I call that *sense*,’ she asserted. ‘We can’t always help the way we feel, but we *can* help the way we behave.’

(‘Salvation by works, not by faith,’ commented the inconsequent side of Betty’s mind. She couldn’t quite remember which it was one was supposed to believe in, though as a child she had made a habit of reading the Thirty-nine Articles at the end of the Prayer Book when the sermon bored her—which was more often than not.)

‘Now, if the mistress had had that feeling,’ Agnes went on in her weighty, dramatic manner, ‘wouldn’t she have rushed straight into the house, like a mad thing, and flown at me to find out what I was hiding from her?’

‘You see, Miss, it’s like this,’ she went on confidentially, ‘I know where I am with you and Mr. Clifford—though he always was such a scatter-brain, to be sure—and I know what you will be doing next—but the mistress—well I daresay it’s being a foreigner—I never feel not quite—not quite *safe*, as you might say, not about her. It’s not anything *against* her I’m saying—but I never feel she’s quite—not quite *one of us*, if you see what I mean. And it’s my belief we don’t rightly understand her.’

‘Yes, Agnes, I do know what you mean,’ Betty admitted. ‘There’s such a lot one takes for granted with one’s own people, isn’t there? She has a different background. A different starting point.’

Mentally she was contrasting Penelope with Maurice, whom she had known all her life, who was so safe, so accountable, so much a part of herself, who might do wrong, of course, but only certain comprehensible kinds of wrong, who could never give one this sense of insecurity and discomfort.

‘I expect we sometimes seem awfully queer to her,’ she meditated aloud.

‘Well, Miss—I never thought of that—but perhaps we do!’

Betty reflected that it must be very lonely for Penelope if they all seemed as queer to her as she sometimes did to them.

When Penelope came in Betty went up to her room and tackled her about the books, though with a weary sense of futility.

'But, my dear,' Penelope replied, 'I am sure I gave nothing you would wish to keep. I took a few to the poor lame boy at the post office—he so worshipped Clifford—and then some to the Vicar, for I am sure he can find a use for them better than growing dusty on the shelves where no one ever looks at them. Indeed, dear, I gave nothing you could possibly want.'

'I daresay not,' Betty conceded, 'but I expect they thought it odd all the same. What did they say?'

Penelope smiled, and answered with a certain restrained bitterness, 'The Vicar he told me, like you, like every one—be brave and not lose hope. Shut my eyes he meant and pretend. Why is it "brave" to do that? I do not understand what you mean by "brave" or what it has to do with knowing a thing or not knowing. I much feared he would make me take back all the heavy books I had brought so far, as though that would make Clifford more likely to return.'

She sighed, took off her bonnet with its long veil, and ran her fingers through her hair to loosen it and cool her head. 'Does he fear I will make haste to marry again, and Clifford will come back and it will all be very awkward?' she asked with fretful contempt.

She sat down, unfastened and kicked off her shoes.

'I am tired,' she complained, 'the day is warm and my feet ache.'

'Don't forget,' Betty reminded her, 'that it's to-day, we are lunching with Mrs. Forbes.'

'I shall not forget,' Penelope answered sadly. 'I have time to rest a little and cool my feet before making myself gay. Arthur comes for us, does he not?'

As she talked she unfastened her black dress and slipped it off. Her underclothes, too, were black, though in those days black underclothes were almost more than eccentric. Then she wrapped herself in a dressing-gown and sat down on the bed.

'I shall be ready, never fear,' she assured Betty, who was just leaving the room. 'As gay as a lark. As gay as a rainbow.'

'Darling Pen,' thought Betty. 'She is wonderful. She really is a dear.'

It was not a new thought to her that they must all seem as strange to Penelope as she did to them, but somehow it was rather a harrowing one to-day. 'I'd never marry a foreigner,' she thought, 'their standards are different, their outlook—the point they start from—everything. They may be all right but——' She shivered, feeling Penelope's loneliness as a concrete thing, definite and inseparable from Penelope.

'I'm glad Maurice is English'—she finished her sentence defiantly, so as to silence the inner voice which whispered that she would quite probably never marry anyone at all; for with all her good sense in the practical conduct of daily life, Betty was romantic by conviction. She believed that love was the greatest thing in the world, that when once you had loved truly—as she loved Maurice—it was

impossible to love again, and that marriage without love was unspeakably degrading. All of which she had unconsciously assimilated out of the novels she was accustomed to read in those days.

She looked at her watch, and considered whether she would go out in the garden again or whether she would set to work and write those few, troublesome, unimportant letters that she must write some time, but that there was no special reason for writing to-day or to-morrow or the next day. She decided for the garden. There was a lot of work to be done at this time of year in the way of tidying and tying up and cutting off dead blooms—more than the gardener could possibly cope with.

CHAPTER IV

FAR AWAY

TALK ABOUT NOT SEEING THE WOOD FOR TREES! One could not see the trees for the branches, the roots, the creepers, the orchids, the ferns that were always so near as to be hitting one in the eye!

Layland, the young and new Assistant District Officer of that peculiarly remote and forsaken district, was coming painfully to the conclusion that what the Sakai meant by a path was a direction in which the jungle, though perfectly solid, was just penetrable with an effort.

Every step was over, under, and between branching roots and rooting branches and great wandering snake-like stems that strayed diagonally through the tangle. Once something struck him lightly on the back of the neck and lodged just inside his collar. He put up his hand quickly, not knowing what noxious insect he might not have to brush away, and found a beautiful scarlet flower that must have dropped from some upper sunlit region, far above his head and beyond his sight.

‘Fallen through the roof, by Jove!’ he murmured, and, being sentimental, he stuffed it into his pocket. It seemed to offer some kind of assurance that fresh air and space and daylight had not ceased to exist.

At last the hot, dense gloom began to lighten, and the air became less stagnant—more alive.

The reason was not obvious at first, but the fact was that they were travelling along a steep hillside, and the increasing slope lengthened the distance between the treetops, so that a thinner screen was presented to the outer light and air.

Then suddenly a slanting, stabbing shaft broke through the foliage ahead, striking one cluster of smooth leaves and making it sparkle with painful, metallic radiance.

By this time the ground was so steep that the roots of the tree on which he was treading were level with the upper branches of its neighbour, and from tree to tree, down the cliff-like slope, fell ropes, ladders, cascades of tough-stemmed creepers.

It was down this tangle of roots, treetops and stems that one descended. He blundered on after his guides, giddy with the heat and exertion. He stood a moment at the bottom, panting and mopping his face; and then the Malay policeman who had been in charge of the search party, and who had reported the find, told him, 'This is the place.'

He did not see the bones till they were pointed out to him; for new, strange, aggressive vegetation was springing up, through and round and over them.

'Nothing has been moved,' said the policeman, rather priggishly.

Layland's first thought was that nature had really overdone the thing this time. It was exaggerated—it wasn't probable—it was absurdly melodramatic—the contrast between those few extraordinarily

dead bones, and the mad exuberance of life all round.

Elsewhere one saw the face, the limbs, the hair and clothes of the earth; here one seemed to be in some secret vital spot, near the beat of the heart, warm with the flow of the blood. And here one found a handful of dead bones. The thing was overdone. It probably symbolised something; but, hang it all, it was too thick. The Sakai stood waiting for orders while he gazed.

Dead bones—so here was Clifford White; the man he had never met, but whom, for a while, he had so looked forward to meeting. . . . Clifford had written to him that he was leaving A on such a date and hoped to reach B about such another, and that he would put up at the Rest House there. A pleasant, friendly kind of letter it had been. A little later he had written again, saying that he had altered his plans and would be going a different way. Layland remembered how disappointed he had been, and how lonely he had felt—how cut off from the world—after receiving that second letter.

Dead bones—all the eternal platitudes that have been said and thought upon the subject dawned like fresh truths upon his mind.

The Malay policeman watched him, wondering whether the dead man had been his friend, or why he stood so long staring down with set face and clenched hands.

‘But perhaps this is not Clifford White,’ Layland’s thoughts ran on. ‘Perhaps this is the other—his companion.’

'There should be two,' he said ; 'has any trace been found of the other?'

He directed them, and watched them gathering up the bones. They were not in position and a good many seemed to be missing. Some animal must have been at them. 'He may have died a long way from here,' Layland reflected.

'They'll probably never find the other,' he thought; 'he may be simply anywhere.'

It was amazing that they should have found this. Amazing that with the whole jungle to search the Sakai should have happened upon these insignificant relics in this hidden spot. It could only be chance—pure chance. He said something of the kind to the policeman, who answered, 'They saw the creeper from across the valley.' He pointed up as he spoke at something which the District Officer with his eyes always on the ground—looking for the next step—looking for the bones—had not noticed. Close beside them stood a tall tree, draped from the top to quite near the bottom with a thick curtain of dead creeper.

Layland gasped at the sight. It seemed that nature was really playing up for once, hanging out a huge banner of death above the place where most of the dead man lay. He could imagine how conspicuous that must have been, seen across the valley from its own level, among all that sea of living, striving green.

'Astonishing!' he murmured. 'What made it die?'

He was not expecting an answer, but the policeman replied with a kind of subtle pleasure in the

sensation he found himself producing, 'The stem is cut through.'

And so it was. Layland went near and stooped down to examine it. Patiently, skilfully, methodically cut. There was the knife with which it had been done, stuck fast into the woody stem where it had been thrust when its work was done, rusting there.

The workmanship was rather like that of a beaver. A circle of thin, wedge-shaped slices had been taken out of the stem, each with the thin edge of the wedge pointing upwards, another circle meeting it just below with the thin edge pointing downwards. This process had been repeated again and again. One thin, wedge-shaped slice after another, until the tough wood had been narrowed to something like the waist of an hour-glass, and at last the stem had snapped of itself, and the upper part had sunk a little with its own weight.

Layland passed his hand lightly over the cuts. He was extraordinarily moved. He wished he believed enough in prayer and immortality and so on for there to be any sense in praying for the dead; for at the sight of that patient, laborious work he felt a sudden contact with the dead man's mind, and from the bottom of his heart he wished him well.

Clifford White—well that was not certain, but the man whose bones lay there—lost, alone, doomed, had realised his smallness, his inconspicuousness under the piled-up mass of vegetable life. He had pictured himself lying unconscious among the ferns while help passed perhaps within a few yards of

him, and he had hung out that enormous signal of distress above his head.

From across the valley it would be strangely conspicuous—until it rotted and grew green with parasitic life—an island in the sea—an oasis in the waste of verdure—something that would catch the eye and hold the attention. In all that monotonous diversity it would lift an individual voice; and anyone looking for something and not knowing where to look is drawn insensibly towards anything that differs strikingly from its surroundings

‘Good luck to you—God keep you,’ he murmured not knowing quite what he meant by that except that he wished the dead man well.

‘And see—above——’ the policeman went on, a little shyly; for he was convinced by now that this was a dear friend—perhaps a kinsman.

Layland raised his eyes, and let them travel along the dead stem. For some way the leaves and branches had been cut away so as to leave it bare, and just about level with his own shoulder another cut had been made in the wood, fairly deep but not right through, and in this a small waterproof packet was carefully wedged.

Again it seemed that the dead man spoke clearly and intelligibly. If the packet had been left on the ground it would soon have been overgrown and buried with vegetable life; if he had kept it in his hand or in his pocket he had no certainty that his body would not be disturbed by wild beasts.

Layland took it down from its place, turned it over and examined it before opening. It was a neatly

wrapped parcel of some kind of waterproof stuff. He noted how carefully the ends were folded and turned in. It was tied with strips of cotton material—perhaps a torn handkerchief. The knots were firm but the stuff itself had begun to rot with heat and moisture. It would not have lasted much longer.

Inside the outer cover he found a waterproof pocket case, and inside that two smaller packages, one slightly larger than the other, each again carefully wrapped in waterproof, each tied with strips of the same white cotton. Everything was carefully folded and tucked so as to allow no cracks to let in moisture.

Human thought, deliberate human intention were evident in every detail, and for some reason, between the dead bones and the living jungle, Layland found it extraordinarily touching. At the same time in a detached and separate fashion he was reminded of the parcels which he and his friends used to send one another on the First of April.

He opened the smaller of the two packets. It contained simply a closed envelope addressed to Mrs. White. With a queer shock Layland recognised the writing. He might have expected it, and yet it startled him, as a sudden recognition often will. It was the same as that of the letter which Clifford White had written to him.

For a moment he thought that this fact settled the identity of the bones; then he realised that it did nothing of the kind. Clifford White might very well have given the letter to his friend to take on if he himself had died first.

He undid the larger package.

This, too, contained an envelope—an envelope addressed in the same firm, clear, rather old-fashioned writing.

‘To whoever finds me. Kindly open immediately.’

‘Finds me.’ Not, ‘Finds this.’ That had a definite meaning, that did seem to fix at last the identity of the bones—to indicate at least that Clifford White had expected to die near the spot where the package would be found.

‘Kindly open immediately.’

He could do nothing but obey; he did not even pause to wonder at the strangeness of the message. Inside that envelope there was another addressed to Miss Betty White, and a note on a separate sheet of paper.

‘I wish this letter to be sent to my niece only if she is still unmarried. Otherwise it can only cause great unhappiness and do no good. If you find, on enquiry, that she is already married, kindly destroy it unread, and let the knowledge of its existence go no further than absolutely necessary. I am dying and can only leave myself in your hands, whoever you may be.

‘CLIFFORD WHITE.’

It was only then that Layland perceived the oddity of the whole business.

‘I am dying,’ he said, but apparently he had settled down to die in a surprisingly vigorous state.

The writing was all in indelible pencil, otherwise it was exactly that of the letter which Layland had received before. It was not even shaky. The folding

of the parcels, the tying of the knots indicated a steady hand, a clear mind, and a complete absence of hurry. And as for the careful way he had cut through the thick, tough-stemmed creeper with an utterly inadequate knife . . . why that alone must surely have taken days.

Such surprising energy in his last moments might seem to point to sudden death—but yet—to sudden death *foreseen*. Suicide? It looked like it.

And yet the thought of suicide harmonised very ill with all one had ever heard of Clifford White, the explorer, naturalist, collector of rare plants, and peculiar insects.

And the other man—where was he? Disappeared, probably never to be found again. Buried in orchids and ferns and plants with flowers like jam tarts, plants with tendrils like octopuses, nightmare of plants that grew while you watched them, and turned into something else.

‘That’s all, is it?’ he asked, looking down at the sheet where they had gathered the bones. Just about enough there to make two-thirds of a human being, he thought. There was his watch, too, and one or two other little odds and ends.

‘Do you think all these belong to the same man?’ he asked.

It seemed probable they did, for, so far as one could tell without measurement, there was no disparity in size; nor did there seem to be any duplicates.

‘Better look about you and see if you can find any more.’

The two letters he put back in the case and slipped it into his pocket.

‘ . . . no further than absolutely necessary . . . dying . . . in your hands.’

He didn’t know what to make of it all. He didn’t know what he meant to do about it.

CHAPTER V

HOW THE NEWS CAME

BETTY HAD BEEN BUSY SOME TIME, AND WAS BEGINNING to wonder whether she ought not to go in and wash and change, when she heard the sound of a motor coming along the road towards the gate.

‘Why, I believe that’s Arthur’s car!’ she thought. ‘How time flies when one is busy!’

She listened more carefully.

‘Well, certainly it is.’ She looked at her wrist-watch; held it to her ear to make sure that it was going.

‘Am I slow?’ she wondered, ‘or is he outrageously early?’

At that moment he turned into the drive. He saw her, waved to her, and called out something that she could not catch. The next moment he stopped his car, got down and came to her recklessly across the flower-beds.

‘Betty,’ he began breathlessly, ‘thank goodness I’ve found you alone. There’s news——!’

‘Good or bad?’ asked Betty feeling suddenly stiff and frozen inside.

‘Both!’ he answered. ‘Maurice—he’s come back.’

‘Back?’ cried Betty, ‘back? Do you mean you’ve seen him?’

‘Yes. I’ve seen him. He’s at home.’

Only then did Betty realise how certain she had been that neither she nor they would ever see him again.

She blinked, and swallowed, and could not speak.

‘He’s at home now,’ Arthur went on jerkily. ‘He—he’ll be all right. He’s all right. He’s there. But——’

‘Oh, I understand!’ Betty interrupted with a moan, ‘Uncle Clifford——?’

‘Yes,’ said Arthur. ‘Yes. That’s it. He’s dead.’

They looked at each other for a moment with dismay. Neither of them said Penelope’s name, but they were both thinking of her, and the thought made them feel queer—stranded—helpless.

‘Oh,’ Betty panted at last, ‘oh, what shall we do?’

‘She—she’ll take it badly, you think?’ Arthur asked hesitatingly.

‘Oh, I don’t know. How can one say? She says she’s known for ages, but that isn’t the same—is it—*feeling* you know a thing—as *really* knowing it?’

Arthur shook his head. The question—the whole problem—was beyond him. It struck Betty suddenly that he looked queer, white, exhausted. That it had taken more than the news of her uncle’s death to make him look like that.

‘But Maurice?’ she asked. ‘He’s all right you say? Where is he?’

‘He’s here. At home I mean. Yes, he’s all right. I mean he will be. He’s been ill. But he’s all right—or will be.’

His manner was even more alarming to Betty than his words.

‘What do you mean? What’s wrong, then? You’re not telling me something, I don’t understand you——’

Arthur gathered himself to reply. ‘Yes. It’s no worse than I told you. We sent for the doctor. He says there’s nothing much the matter. But he’s awfully knocked up. He must have had a ghastly time. But he’s all right. Honestly, he’ll be all right. You do believe me, Betty, don’t you?’

‘Yes,’ she sighed, ‘I do believe you.’ She was thankful as she spoke that one always could—that he would never lie to her, even to spare her feelings. ‘Only I don’t understand. Didn’t he cable? Didn’t you know he was coming?’

‘No. I’ll tell you exactly what happened. He simply turned up last night and threw stones at my window till I came down and let him in. Just as he used to sometimes when we were boys. He looked awful—he was shivering and trembling all over. I fetched him in and got him a drink. He didn’t seem able to eat anything. He just said, ‘Cliff’s dead; but it’s not my fault.’

‘How awful!’ Betty murmured.

‘Yes. That was all he said then, and I didn’t try to make him talk any more. He—you see—he looked so rotten, I just got him to bed and sent for the doctor.’

‘Oh, Arthur—when can I see him?’

Arthur hesitated miserably before answering. ‘I don’t know, Betty—the truth is he doesn’t want to see anyone. He’s queer. He keeps on repeating, “Cliff’s dead; he died of a fever; it wasn’t my fault.”’

'Oh, Arthur, how dreadful!' moaned Betty.

That Maurice should disclaim responsibility for Uncle Clifford's death was something more fantastically, nightmarishly horrible than she could ever have imagined. If he had said: 'I killed him,' it would have seemed less ghastly, less grotesque.

'I say, Arthur,' she said, 'I'll go upstairs and tell Penelope. You'd better come in and wait. She'll want to see you.'

'All right,' Arthur agreed, not liking the prospect at all.

But in the hall they saw Penelope coming downstairs in her beautiful frock of dark wine-coloured silk, a strange, vivid, tropical bird.

'Pen——' Betty gasped, suddenly choking, 'Pen—dear——'

A bird-like glance of swift dark eyes, from Betty to Arthur's white, frightened face.

'News?' she murmured questioningly.

Arthur nodded, he would have spoken, but Penelope gave him no time.

'Ah, Betty! my poor Betty!' she cried, 'my dear child—my poor girl I understand!' She threw her arms round Betty as she spoke and pulled her close, and Betty sobbed suddenly against her shoulder, though the moment before she had not felt in the very least like crying.

'My poor Betty! My poor child!'

They were standing near the carved wooden chest in which carriage rugs and such things were kept. Penelope sat down on that, drawing Betty down with her. Then, with her arm still round her, she

turned to Arthur and said, 'I have known so long, but to poor Betty it is all new. Will you not tell us how you have heard? Do not be afraid,' she went on as Arthur hesitated. 'Clifford is dead. I have known so long. Tell me—have they found him? We have had no word.'

'No——' Arthur stumbled, 'nothing has been found that I know of, but late last night Maurice turned up. . . .'

'*Maurice* turned up!' cried Penelope, pinching Betty hard in her excitement. 'Do you tell me Maurice is alive?'

'Yes—last night . . .'

She would not wait to hear what he had to say. 'Betty—Betty—do you hear that? Maurice is alive—he's back.'

'But this is good news, Arthur, this is *good* news. Clifford is dead, but that's no news at all, he has been dead these ages and ages. This is good news, and Betty, you cry and cry, and Arthur looks so sad!'

Her voice wavered and broke. She was nearer crying herself than she realised.

'Sorry, Pen, I *am* being rather an ass,' Betty apologised, sitting up and blowing her nose. Penelope patted her hand.

'But tell me, Arthur,' she went on, 'tell me everything. Maurice is back—what does he say? He was with Clifford I suppose—then he can tell me——'

Her voice failed, she bit her lip, and looked pleadingly at Arthur,

'I'm frightfully sorry,' he said, 'there's awfully little I can tell you. I'm afraid it's out of the question for you to see Maurice just yet. He's been ill and he's terribly knocked up. He didn't say anything except, "Cliff's dead—he died of a fever—it wasn't my fault," and he kept on saying it, and—and—and—I did my best to keep him off the subject.'

'Oh, I understand,' Penelope sighed.

'I'm glad you do. He simply couldn't stand the idea of seeing anyone—not Betty even—certainly not you I'm afraid.'

'Oh, I understand,' she repeated sadly. 'Tell him I have known for a long, long time; then perhaps he will be less afraid of me. But he is ill, you say? What is the matter?'

Arthur explained rapidly that he seemed to have been very ill, and to have got better and then to have caught a slight chill on top of his convalescence.

'Just at the moment he seems to be simply worn out with fatigue and all that. All we have to do is keep him warm and quiet and let him sleep, feed him when he wakes and let him sleep again.'

'But, Betty——' Penelope insisted, 'surely she should go with you. When he wakes he will wish for her almost before he wishes to be fed!'

'Oh, I don't know,' Arthur demurred unhappily. 'I can't quite make him out. He seems scared—thoroughly scared of seeing anyone.'

'Ah, but Betty—she is the person who will cure him of that.'

Arthur sincerely hoped she might. 'But he was *queer*,' he said, 'He kept saying, "It wasn't my fault; it wasn't my fault," for all the world as if he thought someone was going to blame him. "It wasn't my fault," until I somehow felt that he somehow felt that it somehow *was*, you know.'

'But I can understand that so well,' Penelope declared. 'I believe we should all feel the same. To be the one to escape when his companion perished. Even he may have made some little mistake—may have given him the wrong medicine. When a man's friend is dead he can find reasons for remorse. He has been ill, too, himself you say, and when one is ill then one feels to blame for everything.'

'He says to you now "It was not my fault" because he has been saying it all the while to himself. All the while that he has been ill. Trying to make himself believe it.'

'You do not understand these things, you boys and girls. But I, I understand. Reassure him. Set his mind at ease. Tell him we knew of Clifford's death long, long ago.'

Her voice sank a little. 'Tell him it is a comfort to know so good a friend was with him at the last.'

'Penelope, I think you're a saint,' Arthur declared with sudden conviction.

She laughed.

'A saint? Oh no. But I have known this so long, it is no shock to me as to you. I can be reasonable now. And your mother——?'

'Oh she's delighted to have him back,' said Arthur, thankful for a change of subject. 'He didn't want

to see her either, so I took her in when he was asleep. Of course I don't know what she's going to make of him presently, but just now she's in heaven. It's been an awful strain, all this waiting. I haven't told her about Cliff yet.'

Penelope smiled and shook her head comprehendingly.

'My poor Arthur, you will have both hands full with those two.'

'Yes—I think I shall,' he agreed. 'In fact I think I ought to be getting back to them. Maurice may be waking any time—and heaven knows——'

'It was good of you to come yourself; we must not keep you.'

'I'd have come sooner, but I couldn't leave them alone in the house with the servants in the state they were in. I had to wait till Mrs. Grayson was able to come——'

Mrs Grayson was the vicar's wife, a good neighbour and a sensible woman.

'And I'm afraid I ought to be getting back now.'

'Oh, Arthur!' cried Betty suddenly rousing herself. 'Please take me with you. Let me see him. It's—it's—*awful*.'

'Oh, Betty—I don't know—I don't like to do that! The doctor says all he needs is rest and quiet, but he needs that pretty badly.'

'But I could make him *see*,' Betty insisted. 'I feel sure I could make him understand that we don't feel he's to blame for anything.'

She began to cry again, although she was trying hard not to.

'I can't bear to know he's ill and unhappy—and so near—and do nothing. Do let me come back with you.'

Arthur felt himself wavering. The problem was one completely outside his scope. He really did not know what was the right thing to do.

Penelope came to the rescue.

'No, Betty,' she said, 'that is not the way to do it.' She turned to Arthur and went on, 'You must not do anything to lessen your brother's confidence in you; he must not think that anyone, not even Betty, is brought to see him against his will. See, Betty—he might think that I would come next and question him about Clifford. He is ill, and he has come home, and whatever it costs you, my Betty, he must feel that his home is *safe*.'

'Let him get well, let him get strong, let him recover himself. And Arthur shall let us know how he is every day.'

'Of course I will,' Arthur agreed.

'And if he should say anything,' Penelope went on rather wistfully, 'any little thing about Clifford—though it should seem a thing of no interest at all——'

'You shall hear immediately,' Arthur assured her.

'It is likely Clifford would give him some message for me—but I can wait. It will do me no harm. Only if he should happen——'

'Why, of course—I'd let you know at once.'

'And perhaps,' she concluded, 'there will be nothing at all. If he died in a fever perhaps he was

not himself, and so there will be nothing. . . . And Betty, you must wait, too.'

Arthur took his leave rather hastily.

'We can't settle much now,' he said, 'but I'll let you know how things are every day—oftener if there's anything to tell.'

He was just going—he had his hand on the door when there was a ring at the bell.

Rather an anticlimax it seemed—the telegraph boy with a cable from Mr. McKay—the cable they had been expecting so long. Penelope took it and read it.

'They have found Clifford's body,' she told them, feeling that somehow that rounded the matter off neatly. 'Well, so they have found it. And no trace of Maurice, so he says, and he is writing, the man who sends this. That is all.' She turned to the boy who was waiting in the doorway.

'There is no answer.' But immediately she had spoken she corrected herself. 'No—stay—there is. I will write one.' She turned to the others. 'I must tell them Maurice is returned, so they will not go on looking for him.'

'What a perfect saint she is,' Arthur murmured when she had gone into the drawing-room to write her reply.

'Saint? Penelope?' Betty demurred uneasily.

'I think she's marvellous,' he declared.

Betty agreed. Marvellous—oh yes; but yet she found herself recalling what Agnes had said that very morning, 'Not quite one of us.'

Penelope was beautiful, but with the beauty of a bird, an insect, a tropical flower—remote—strange

—perhaps a little uncanny. ‘What next?’ Betty found herself wondering. She loved Penelope and admired her. But yet she was a little afraid; for she knew she did not understand her.

‘Well, Arthur, I suppose you must be off.’ Very regretfully Betty said it, for his presence gave her a sense of companionship, almost of safety.

‘Yes, I should think I’d better.’

She followed him out and along the drive to where he had left his car when he got down to speak to her. She did not quite know what to say. He must go back, she realised that, and yet she could not bear to let him go.

‘You are sure the doctor thinks he’ll be all right?’ she asked, more for the sake of saying something than for any other reason.

‘Yes, Betty—really,’ Arthur assured her.

She was glad she trusted him as she did; some people one might suspect of lying, either to save themselves trouble or to spare one’s feelings, seeing that one could do no good.

‘Don’t worry too much,’ he added, ‘about what he says I mean, and his not wanting to see you. He’s ill that’s all. That makes him queer. He’ll be all right when he’s rested. We’ve all got to wait I’m afraid. He’s just not himself now.’

Betty did not doubt that what Arthur said he firmly believed. She believed it too in a way; but yet she could not help the queer sensation in her chest and an ill-defined feeling of uneasiness—something not in her mind, so it seemed to her, but a sense of strain in the material fabric of her body.]

Arthur was just getting into his car when he remembered something he had meant to say.

'There's another thing—Lizzy—I believe for the next day or so Lizzy might be happier with you than with us.' (Lizzy was Maurice's wire-haired terrier.) 'She was asleep when Maurice came back, but she smelt him out this morning and simply went crazy. I'm ashamed to say I'd forgotten all about her—but she found her way to his room and began scratching on his door, whining and carrying on——'

'But couldn't you have let her in?' Betty asked.

'Well I might have earlier, but the doctor had given him something to send him to sleep. I was afraid she'd wake him, so she had to be hauled off. Poor little blighter, she's shut up in the garage simply howling her heart out—won't touch her food.'

'Oh, poor Lizzy,' Betty murmured.

'I do sympathise,' she added smiling, 'I'm in a position to.'

Arthur nodded. He was glad he had thought of sending Lizzy here. These two devoted and unhappy beings could console one another to some extent.

'It's really worse for Lizzy,' she went on nobly, 'because she doesn't understand. One can't explain. One can't tell her *why* anything.'

'No—it's beastly for her,' Arthur agreed, 'and I thought perhaps over here with you she might be—I won't say happier but—rather less wretched. May I send her along sometime?'

‘Oh do—*please* do.’

But then suddenly she saw the matter in a different light. ‘But I don’t understand—you can’t mean—you don’t mean—he won’t want to see *Lizzy* when he wakes up?’

That a man should refuse to see his mother or his love, though distressing, was possible and intelligible; but that anyone should find himself unable to face his wire-haired terrier bitch simply did not make sense.

Arthur explained that the doctor hoped Maurice might sleep twenty-four hours or more, or, if he woke, might fall asleep again without really rousing.

‘And he might find her a bit overpowering you know. She’d simply be all over him, and gobble him up with affection. And its horribly tantalising for her shut up in the garage, knowing he’s in the house, and really I don’t see who in our household is going to attend to her the next few days.’

‘Well, I’ll do my best to comfort her,’ Betty promised.

‘All right. But you’ll have to keep her tied up. Someone shall bring her round this evening unless I come myself.’

‘And you won’t keep her from him longer than you must, will you?’ Betty begged. ‘Remember she can’t understand that things are going to be different presently. She doesn’t know about present and future. *Now*, is always and for ever to her.’

But just as Arthur was about to start his car it seemed to Betty that she couldn’t bear it—herself, she couldn’t bear it, even though she understood,

as Lizzy did not, the transitory nature of present conditions.

‘Arthur,’ she began suddenly. ‘Look here—*can’t* I come with you?’

He looked hurt and shook his head. ‘I’m afraid not, Betty. Really I think better not. In fact *I can’t* take you—not just now.’

‘But if he’s asleep,’ she pleaded, ‘I won’t wake him. I won’t worry him. I won’t see him if he doesn’t want me too. Only if I was there I’d be ready if he did.’

He saw that it was necessary to explain more fully. Fortunately his trust in Betty was as complete as hers in him.

‘I’m awfully sorry—but—the fact is he made a most awful scene. It’s true, what Pen said about his confidence in me. Truer than she knew. I had to promise that I wouldn’t—that you shouldn’t, I mean—before I could get him to settle down or anything.’

‘Oh,’ Betty remarked; and left it at that. There really seemed nothing else left that one could say.

‘I’m awfully sorry,’ Arthur murmured awkwardly, much embarrassed by his sympathy with her distress. ‘It’s—I mean to say—I——’

He pulled himself up as though he had said too much, as though he had trespassed too far in expressing himself about her intimate concerns.

‘Well ta-ta. And you’ll be kind to Lizzy, won’t you?’

‘Oh yes,’ Betty assured him. ‘Poor Lizzy. Poor, poor Lizzy!’ It was rather a luxury to pity poor

Lizzy, since her stringently Spartan code did not allow her to pity herself.

Penelope meanwhile was writing her reply to the cable. She gave it to the telegraph boy, with the money to pay for it; then went up to her room and changed into the black dress which no one would now dispute her right to wear.

She felt tired and melancholy. This was nothing new; it was that, perhaps, that saddened her. It was all over so long—so long ago. No longer was her loss an exclusive personal thing, to be asserted in the face of a world that denied its reality. Even her sorrow seemed hardly her own now that she need not fight for it. The future looked flat and dull and stale. She saw her grief losing its sharp edge, her widowhood becoming a thing of custom and habit.

Nothing to do for Clifford, no battle to fight for him or for his memory, as these past few months she had been fighting for her right to mourn. She had been uprooted too often. Father, mother, she scarcely remembered. She had practically lost the use of the language they spoke to her. The companions of her girlhood had made no real impression, had taken no hold of her nature. She had easily lost touch with them when Clifford took her away. He had been the only real thing in her life. She had loved him intensely and passionately, but without understanding, without wishing to share.

There had been no equality between them. He really need not have married her had it not suited him to do so. She would have done just as well as his

mistress or his slave. But it pleased him that she should be his wife, it had pleased him that she should learn to behave like an English lady. Her progress had delighted him, she was so young, so pliant, so adaptable, so eager to please. She had accepted his friends, his life, his habits, all because she loved him. But now that he was gone there seemed no sense in the life she had been content to live for his sake. Nor was there any other life to which she could have thought of returning, that might seem to promise anything better. The whole universe was empty and stale.

Finding that Betty was not in the hall when she came down again, she walked out on to the drive and met her there.

‘Do not worry yourself, Betty,’ she said. ‘See now, and be honest; you did not really believe in your heart that Maurice was alive and would come back, is that not true?’

Betty admitted that it was.

‘Then so much is gain, pure gain. Start from your belief that he was dead and lost and you would never see him again; and then is it such a very bad thing that he is ill and you cannot see him to-day or to-morrow or maybe the day after?’

Yes, Betty allowed that she had much to be thankful for. It was not so much Maurice’s illness that distressed her, for Arthur assured her that it was not serious, it was not the mere fact that she could not see him for the moment; it was her sense of something strange in his conduct, of something unexplained in the circumstances of his return,

‘It’s what he said to Arthur,’ she confessed to Penelope. ‘I don’t seem to understand it. He must have been feeling most awfully bad about something to say that.’

‘You do not understand—I understand so well,’ Penelope declared. ‘He is ill and weak. He cannot bear the thought he was to blame. He says to convince himself, “It was not my fault,” because he feels in his heart it was.’

She went on to explain her view of the matter. The mere fact that they had been together, that one had died and the other had escaped, would be enough to give the survivor a sense of guilt. ‘And so he blames himself for this or for that,’ for every little thing that may have contributed to make Clifford ill. Did they eat something perhaps that was not wholesome? Did they sleep in some unhealthy spot? Did they go too far when Clifford was tired? So many reasons: “If we had not done this,” he says to himself, ‘then he might not have been ill. If we had done that he might have recovered.’

‘Always you can find a reason when a friend is dead why he might not have died if you had not done it.’

Penelope’s syntax was apt to become a little strange when she spoke under stress of feeling, but her meaning was always easy to follow.

‘I think I could understand it better,’ Betty answered, ‘if he had said “It *was* my fault.” ’

‘Why naturally, for that would be a simpler thing to understand,’ Penelope answered readily, ‘that he should feel himself to blame and say “It was my

fault," but this you can understand, too; he feels to blame and says "It was not my fault." '

'Why? Because his own thought is not so simple. He knows in his head that he is not to blame, he knows that Clifford did not really die because they went here, stayed there, ate this or drank that which he could have prevented. And yet his heart feels he is guilty while his head says he is not so. Then he will feel he is to blame and say, "It is not my fault." '

Betty felt there might be something in that; for she felt very much the same way herself when she was able to realise that Maurice was alive and that she would see him again. Actually—absurdly—she did feel a little ashamed of herself for faring in the matter more fortunately than Penelope—a little guilty—a little as though she were cheating.

'And yet it's not my fault,' she told herself, and smiled to find that she was using Maurice's very phrase.

CHAPTER VI

THE FURTHER END

ALL THE WAY BACK THROUGH THE JUNGLE SUCH FEW thoughts as Layland could spare from the immediate problem of where next to put his foot, his head or his hand were occupied with the consideration of what he meant to do about the mysterious letter to Miss Betty White. The more he looked at the question the more intricate it appeared. Fresh points kept jumping into his mind, demanding his consideration.

His final decision, reached, not by any process of reasoning, but by a series of mental leaps performed in the intervals between dodging the next branch and avoiding the next root, was that he would wire the news of his discovery to the District Officer at Kuala Besar, and that he would follow his news as quickly as possible by car and steamer and explain his difficulties in person. He had at first thought of writing, but the subject began to appear too complicated and its implications too various.

McKay was long and lean and weary of life. He was the type of man who in the tropics runs, not to fat, but to string. Damp, limp string in this case, and of a nondescript colour. Whatever the subject of which he spoke his voice had a tired, complaining sound.

Layland—young, brown, serious, very much in earnest—showed him the letters and described the circumstances of the find.

‘Well—er—the widow,’ McKay drawled wearily, ‘I have already—er—notified the—er—widow.’ He liked that word ‘notified’ for some reason. He repeated it. ‘Notified by cable—er—on receipt of—er—well yes—now this—um—er—— Time to catch the mail. Plenty of time to catch the mail. You should I think—er—write—er—a few words of—er—well in fact—er—well—anything that—might—er—so to speak—and—er—so on.’

Layland had known all along that he would have to write some kind of letter. He had, in fact, been scribbling rough drafts of it all the way in the boat. He was far too imaginative and far too sympathetic to find it easy. He was terribly conscious of the woman at the other end who would read it. Sometimes he pictured her very young and rather crude—lithe and stayless, with untidy dark hair and a general appearance of being just ready dressed for a game of hockey. She had a slangy, downright, schoolgirl manner, a fresh colour and rather nice brown eyes. Then—when she was that one—her face all crumpled up suddenly as she read his letter—he could not remember, he could not keep in his mind the fact that it would not bring the first news of her bereavement—and she began to cry as a child cries with rage, beating the sofa with her clenched fists and hiding her face in the cushions.

Sometimes she was middle-aged, fair, pale and patient, with sad blue eyes and smooth, straw-

coloured hair. Then she didn't cry; she shivered and looked bleak and grey, and sat still, gazing blankly into an empty future, holding the letter loosely in her hand. He was himself so obsessed by the horror of his vision of one small ant-like man alone, lost, bewildered, starving in an alien world of crowded, inhuman life, that he was anxious to give no clear impression to the dead man's widow. He strove to suggest by implication that her husband's death had been a commonplace and tolerably comfortable affair.

He did not describe the place where the letter was found; he felt that on no account must he do that. He was a sensitive creature, rather unduly imaginative, and he was haunted by a realisation of the helpless, sickening loneliness of all the hours it must have taken Clifford White to cut through the stem of that creeper; it was like a desperate cry for help heard too late. Not the kind of thing one describes to a sorrowing woman. It spoke of protracted expectation of death, and at the same time of such unconquerable hope. It showed such inventiveness, such tenacity, and such a will to live.

He had not been able to keep himself from speculating about things that could never be known—about the thoughts and emotions that must have accompanied that slow painstaking work. He wondered at the self-control that had never cut too deep and broken the blade in the effort to put on speed.

It would have been mere cruelty to convey all this to the dead man's wife; and he forgot that without

their setting the facts would not speak so clearly. His phraseology was consequently vague and colourless.

‘And this—er—*letter*——’ McKay was droning on. ‘I shall write, too, myself—er—officially as it were. And this—er—yes—should be enclosed, just—er—exactly—er—*just exactly as it is.*’

He emphasised the last phrase, glaring reproachfully at Layland as though he felt certain that the temptation to alter or embellish his find must certainly be too much for him unless he was specifically warned against it.

‘Er—*exactly* as it is,’ he repeated, ‘and you have time to catch the mail.’

‘But what about the other?’ Layland suggested.

Mr. McKay peered at it doubtfully. ‘Well—er—yes. *What* about the other?’ he meditated, seeming to become aware of its existence. ‘Well about the *other* I think that should be sent under a separate cover to the—er—yes—the address is the same, but still I think better *not* enclose them in one envelope. At the same time no need to—er—just a note referring her to—er—no need to *repeat.*’

Layland drew attention once more to the covering letter, ‘To whoever finds me.’

McKay considered it sadly. ‘Well—er—just so. Exactly. The question is in that case—er—well—er—*is* the young lady married?’

‘I wondered how we could find out with the least possible delay,’ Layland put in. ‘You see——’ He was eager to summarise all the points that had presented themselves as worthy of consideration.

‘Extraordinary, *most* extraordinary,’ McKay interrupted him, peering at the words of the covering letter with the air of one just beginning to absorb their meaning. ‘Really most unusual.’ He said the word ‘unusual’ as though any departure from precedent in these matters were a personal grievance.

‘It seemed to me,’ said Layland, ‘that for some reason he must have been anxious to prevent her marriage.’

‘Yes—er—it looks like it. It does look uncommonly like it. Perhaps—er—well—it might be—er—in the family—insanity, you know—and—er—so on—and the poor girl knows nothing about it.’

‘I think if it was that there would surely be someone at home who would know about it. I think more likely——’ All this from Layland had slipped itself in while McKay paused for breath or for consideration in a speech which he now continued as though unaware that anyone else had spoken.

‘Well—er—yes. Exactly. The question is how to find out whether she is married or not. Can’t very well write or cable and ask her. I think the best plan would be to send this *with* the one for Mrs. White—not as I first—er—well—her aunt, you see—“My niece,” he says—aunt by marriage. *She* can then give it her or not. Surely she’d know—or—er—at least a better position to find out.’

Layland protested at that.

Wasn’t it perfectly obvious that the dead man would certainly have done that himself rather than put himself at the mercy of strangers unless he was

most anxious that his wife should know nothing of the matter?

‘Well—er—yes,’ McKay conceded grudgingly. ‘Quite possibly. Yes. Yes—exactly. *Very* possibly. Well in that case better cable to someone in England to find out and let us know.’

‘Quite evident a man like Clifford White—not have made such an unusual request without very good reason. Certainly no right to disregard expressed wishes in the matter for the sake of saving ourselves a little extra trouble. No right at all.’

He glared at Layland with a wan air of virtuous reproof, much as though he had suggested that it would simplify matters to drop all the letters down the well and say nothing about having found them.

‘I suppose that is the only thing to do,’ Layland agreed. ‘We miss the mail that way, and it seems to me it was probably some imminent danger he had in view—not just marriage in general——’

‘Oh, but now I remember,’ McKay mourned on, with an exasperating air of not attending to anything that was said, or rather of being unaware that anyone had spoken except himself. ‘Yes, now I do remember—I’m pretty sure someone told me—yes—it was Mrs. Cotton told my wife—unless I’m very much mistaken—that young fellow that was with him—er—yes—Forbes, that was the name. Well he was engaged to his niece or—er—was it his daughter? So—er—of course he may have more than one—but if not—well—er—no hurry and not much fear, because he was with him and he’s never been heard of since.’

‘Yes—I’m sure. Yes—it’s all coming back now. Niece—not daughter and this summer they were to have—and—er—yes—very sad. So—well—um—no hurry. Or indeed almost send it without waiting for inquiries. Except of course we all know what engagements are nowadays and you can’t be too careful——

‘What’s this? Oh—er—a *cable!*’ His tone of disgust as he took it from the small Malay peon who brought it into the room seemed to imply that the receipt of a cable was the crowning hardship of a miserable, unappreciated and self-sacrificing existence.

‘Well—er’— he sighed, ‘yes—this does—yes—this of course puts a different light upon the matter. This—yes—this is quite another thing. Yes—er I should say that now the whole matter was—er—um—and so on. Well, what do you make of it now?’

Layland suppressed his impatience, and indicated respectfully that without a knowledge of the fresh information contained in the cable he was in no position to form an opinion.

This statement, though tactfully phrased, seemed to annoy McKay. He frowned peevishly and handed over the paper, muttering, ‘Well—er—here it is,’ as though it were his weary destiny to deal with young fools whose ineptitude in thought-reading and clairvoyance was a disgrace to the service.

It was Penelope’s cable to the District Officer at A.

‘Maurice Forbes returned home last night. Penelope White.’

'Well—er—well,' McKay muttered wearily, 'what do you make of that?'

Layland did not answer. First he was struck dumb by surprise, and then again he was assailed by that uncanny sense of something amiss and unexplained that had oppressed him as he watched the Sakai gathering up the bones. He could not have told what he thought or felt on the instant, but it was something that turned him hot and cold.

'Engaged to be married—wedding this summer—was to have been—So Mrs. Cotton told my wife.' McKay was complaining as though the matter were a personal grievance.

Layland felt a sick, inexplicable certainty that somehow, at any cost, the marriage must be prevented.

'I think we ought to catch the mail,' he declared unsteadily. 'I don't think there's any time for inquiries. I think it should be posted at once.'

'That's all very well,' his senior grumbled bitterly, 'but who's to tell us whether they aren't married already? Or won't be before this letter reaches her, even if they aren't now?'

Married already? That was sheer, complete disaster, so Layland felt, without knowing how he knew it. Not to try to prevent it seemed like refusing to pull a man out of the river on the grounds that he might be already drowned.

'You see what he says,' McKay ran on sadly and prosily, '*only if she is still unmarried*. Otherwise it can only cause great unhappiness and do no good.'

Don't want to do that, you know; there's trouble enough in the world, and we haven't any right to disregard what he says merely in order to save ourselves trouble.'

'We shall miss the mail,' Layland lamented.

(The body was drifting on down stream alive or dead, while he, on the river bank, struggled with this interminable old bore.)

'Not at all, not at all,' grumbled McKay. 'Plenty of time. Time to spare. Boat can't sail without its papers—just *wait* for them until we've finished writing. These fellows—er—um—er—Singapore—no time—bunkum. You better set to work and write that letter to Mrs. White.' Layland resolved that he would copy without alteration whichever of the rough drafts he had made seemed to him least impossible. That would not take many minutes.

'But what about the other?' he implored.

'Well—er—*what* about the other?' McKay considered, almost as though that were a new idea.

'Oh, what's this? what's this? What on earth is this now?' *This* was the captain of the little steamer that took mail letters down to Singapore, a middle-aged, unobtrusive Malay, with exaggeratedly hollow cheeks, sunken eyes and high cheekbones. Like McKay, he had a chastened, sorrowing air; but he seemed less fretful and more resigned. Only his large grizzled moustache had a faintly aggressive look. The rest of him seemed rather to apologise for its existence.

McKay looked at him as the proverbial camel might regard the placer of the last straw.

‘Well you’ll have to *wait*,’ he announced. ‘We’ve still got some letters to write. Very important letters. Very important indeed.’

‘There’s no hurry,’ he added. ‘It won’t take you all that time to get to Singapore. Perfectly well *wait*!’

The Malay protested that it was not a question of the time required to reach Singapore, but that he was anxious to get out with the tide.

‘Well the tide can *wait*,’ McKay fretted; then he corrected his statement mournfully. ‘I know all about these *tides*.’ He spoke of them as though they had been specially created for his annoyance. ‘I know all there is to know about miserable tides. Still be perfectly safe to get out in half an hour’s time—finished writing these letters.’

The Malay captain resigned himself. It was quite true that it would still be safe in half an hour’s time, but he felt that it was very possible that he would be kept forty minutes or even longer. He deprecated the spread of knowledge among District Officers.

McKay turned to Layland with an air of patient exasperation.

‘Have you written that letter?’

‘I’ve just begun it.’

‘Well go on with it. And look here. Roach is in Singapore, and he’s going home this week. This very—er—mail. I shall send him this letter, and explain a bit about it, and ask him to find out as soon as he gets home whether Miss White is married or not. And if she is then post—no, I mean to say the other way round—if she *isn’t* post it to the

address that's given, and if she *is* just put it in the fire and burn it, and of course say nothing about it to anyone.

'That way we don't waste any time. Reach her only a few days later than if we posted it direct. Fact, hardly any later if he leaves the boat at Marseilles.'

Layland realised what the feelings of the prophet Baalam must have been when his ass spoke quite intelligently, and pointed out to him something of the utmost importance which he had failed to notice himself. The plan was not ideal, but it was distinctly better than any alternative he was able to suggest.

'Perfectly safe for another half hour,' McKay muttered sadly.

There was no sound but the whirring of the fan and the scratching of their pens.

'Um—er—let's see what you've said,' McKay suggested when he saw that Layland had finished.

Layland had not realised that this was going to happen.

Embarrassed and reluctant he handed over his letter.

'Um'—McKay commented weightily, 'um—er. Unofficial, of course. The—er—human touch. I will enclose a covering letter, as Mrs. White wrote to me officially.'

'All right, perfectly safe for another half hour,' he added in order to show that he had not forgotten the time. It was now about a quarter of an hour since he had first made that remark. He was

still murmuring the same thing about ten minutes later, but fortunately by this time all the letters were finished and the captain had his papers and was escaping with unobtrusive haste, lest any further hitch should occur.

CHAPTER VII

‘YOUTH AT THE HELM.’

WHEN PENELOPE HAD SAID THAT ARTHUR WOULD have his hands full she had in no way exaggerated.

Arthur was young and willing. He was fitted for his task by an immense readiness to serve his friends, a kind of conscientious eagerness to do whatever circumstances required of him and a sympathetic and generous nature. He was unfitted for it by lack of experience, by lack of self-confidence, and often enough by the very paralysing intensity of his feeling for those who suffered, or might be about to suffer.

At first, as was hoped and anticipated, Maurice slept. Having extracted from Arthur a promise that Betty should not be brought to the house, he relaxed all effort, and sank into an ocean of exhaustion and forgetfulness.

‘This will do him all the good in the world,’ the doctor had declared encouragingly. ‘This is exactly what he needs. You’ll see, he’ll wake from this a different being.’

To Maurice it seemed that he was drifting out, right out, of a world that was intolerable. He did not exactly expect to die, his mind was not clear enough to expect one thing more than another; but his attitude was one of surrender and of refusal. Re-

fusal of the future, with which he felt himself unable to cope, and blessed surrender to an annihilation of thought, of consciousness and of responsibility. So perfect was his surrender, so complete his refusal, that they seemed final. As he sank he had no thought that it was not for ever. If he did not exactly expect to die still less did he expect ever to wake.

So Arthur felt free to go back in the afternoon, taking with him the reluctant and disconsolate Lizzie.

‘Poor darling!’ said Betty.

Lizzie received her attentions politely but without enthusiasm.

‘Poor darling, poor darling; it will be all right soon! Oh, aren’t animals too unbearably pathetic? How she does love him!’

Lizzy gazed at her with heart-breaking eyes, half cocked an inquiring ear, just wagged a tentative tail.

Arthur did not stay long.

‘It couldn’t be better,’ he said cheerfully, ‘Maurice is sleeping like a house on fire.’ (Betty was too much interested in his information to quarrel with his choice of simile.) ‘It couldn’t be better. It’s simply bound to mend him up—sleeping like that. So don’t you worry. Everything’s going to be all right now. You’ll hear from us when he wakes, and then we shall see. But I think I ought to be getting back now.

‘And I say—how about Pen?’

Betty described her self-possession, her reasonableness, and repeated what she had said about Maurice.

Then Arthur went home again and she set herself to comforting Lizzy as best she could.

Maurice slept and slept; but at last his sleep grew thin, and he became faintly aware, first of existence, and then of a heavy shapeless blackness, a horror, or a fear that stood round him, waiting for him to wake.

It was as though he had tried to drown himself in deep water, and the sea had gradually ebbed and left him stranded. The darkness round his mind was dissolving little by little. As consciousness returned he shrank from it instinctively. He knew he must wake without yet remembering why to do so would be fatal. He tried to burrow his way back into oblivion, as a crab buries itself in sand when the sea withdraws. A load, a weight of darkness, lay on him. He would not wake, he would not remember.

But yet life had its way, and gave him no choice. Slowly, for all his reluctance, the present shaped itself, the fact of who he was, and where he was, and why and how he came to be there. Inexorably the present dragged back the past; and past and present both pointed to the future.

But the future he would not face.

Arthur—his mother—Betty—he would not think of them. He would not think at all.

And yet he could not stop thinking. The cloud lifted, and his mind went on working in its own way, clearing itself, putting things together, working over the past and mending it as one might darn holes in a torn fabric.

‘No—no—I won’t have it,’ he found himself moaning, burying his face in the pillow, as he tried to bury his mind in unconsciousness. ‘No—no—it’s not true.’

The facts of the case—the facts as he remembered them—they were not true, they were too horrible, too monstrous, too large—they seemed to crush him.

He knew he had been ill. Now as he looked back all his recollections were feverish and broken—like a nightmare. The journey—the boat—the train—had left very little impression on his mind. Much of what he did remember had probably never happened at all. He was haunted by the horror of an insane tropical jungle—swamps where roots turned into snakes, or grotesque spiky lizards, which turned again into terrible flowers.

That was not true—that was distorted and exaggerated from facts; it was merely a reflection of his sick, feverish mind.

And then again there were gaps—black gulfs of darkness—in the past. He had got here from the station somehow, that was self-evident—but how? Had he walked? He could not remember.

‘It’s not true,’ he repeated passionately, ‘it’s not true.’

It was untrue in a far deeper, realler sense than if it merely had not chanced to happen. It was inconceivable. It could never have been. It was out with his character, his principles, his training, the whole of his life, the whole of his past. Nightmares—nightmares.

Could one not act a kind of nightmare as well as dreaming it? Was one responsible for sleep-walking?

‘I won’t have it,’ he cried, ‘I won’t have it.’

But life was too strong for him. It just went on, carrying him along with it. His mind grew clearer, his body stronger and more restless. It was impossible to sleep any longer as he had done, impossible to let go and sink. Fevers of remembrance caught him, and pulled him this way and that; he argued with himself, he fretted, he insisted.

‘I couldn’t help it, I couldn’t help it. It would have been just the same whatever I had done. It must have ended the same way. It wasn’t my fault—I tried—I did my best——’ and so on.

All of which may help to account for the fact that during the next few days his illness took a more serious turn than the doctor had anticipated.

Day by day Arthur reported to Betty, who waited, sick with anxiety and distress, and always he was forced to say—‘He really isn’t awfully well.—He doesn’t seem to get on as fast as we all hoped he would—his temperature keeps jumping about. I don’t mean he’s worse—not exactly worse—it’s up and down all the time——’ And each time he had to add, ‘No—I’m afraid you mustn’t come yet. He’s not himself. And he gets in such an awful stew. He doesn’t seem to mind me, but he can’t bear the thought of anyone else.’

Like most very young people, Arthur was inclined to over-estimate the part played by reason in the conduct of the world and the behaviour of human kind. He assumed that it was natural and customary

for ordinary people to behave in an intelligible, sensible kind of fashion, and that Maurice was queer at the moment simply because he was ill.

The thing was neatly labelled in his mind—cause, ill-health—effect, queer behaviour. He believed that his brother would get better, and that then all his eccentricities would cease, and he would do all that good sense and accepted convention demanded of him; he would give an intelligible account of his own adventures and of Clifford's death, he would feel it his painful duty to answer any questions Penelope might wish to ask, he would greet Betty with appropriate rapture; and they would all settle down and live reasonably and ordinarily ever after.

He had the pathetic faith of the young in the continuance of things they have always known. Not theoretical, absolute permanence, of course—we have all heard that life is uncertain, and we all notice that it contains daily ups and downs, quarrels, reconciliations, gains and losses, sickness and health—but a kind of underlying normal state from which one might temporarily depart, but to which one must inevitably return.

Permanent harm—a lasting departure from what he regarded as the normal—was not a thing that entered his calculations in thinking of himself or his friends. Maurice was ill, and was behaving strangely; he would get well and become reasonable again.

His own task as he saw it was simply to round an awkward corner, to tide over a difficult crisis, to

keep things fairly steady until they were running again of themselves.

In this trying and responsible position he would have been glad of more help and more advice, but he did not know where to turn. His mother he regarded as a person to be spared and treated gently in much the same manner as the temporarily queer Maurice, though to a less extent. Her delicate health, her anxious, emotional nature, and the fact that she was his mother and he was very young, all led him to underestimate the soundness of her judgment and the value of her experience.

He did not repeat to her either what Maurice had said about Clifford's death or the fact that he had made him promise not to bring Betty to the house.

He did not tell her out of a regard for her feelings; he did not tell the doctor or Mrs. Grayson, partly because it did not seem fair to repeat outside the family things a fellow said when he was queer, partly because, like Betty, he felt, though he would not admit it, something unexplained and sinister in the fact that queerness in this particular case had taken this particular form.

It was hard on him that the abnormal—the temporary—should last so long. All his calculations were thrown out by the unexpected duration of the crisis.

Days passed, and Maurice began to grow better, though slowly. No doubt he actually prolonged his illness by a reluctance to get well and take up his life again. Somewhere at the back of his mind he

knew that only as long as he was ill would it be possible to ignore the future, and to shut himself away from existence. There were things he could not face; and once he was well—so he knew without formulating his knowledge—it would be necessary to face them. So, unconsciously, he resisted his recovery, and his mind rebelled against his body, which, following its own law, led him back to health.

Now Arthur found himself reporting to Betty with growing and secret uneasiness, ‘Yes, he’s better. He certainly is quite a lot better in a way. But he’s queer. He doesn’t want to talk; he’s not interested in anything, and one can hardly get him to eat. He sees mother and—Oh, well—he lets her kiss him, you know, and he says it’s nice to be back, and that he’ll be better soon. But—Oh I don’t know—one has a kind of feeling—he looks so fagged and strained. He sometimes pretends to be asleep when she comes in so that he shan’t have to pretend to be polite—and—’

Arthur’s sentences had a tendency to end like that, with a conjunction and a helpless gesture, when he was speaking to Betty about his brother.

But undoubtedly Maurice was better now—he grew better every day. It was his body that was in command, he was born with a healthy constitution, and nature had her way with him, as with any healthy animal, in spite of the sickness of his human soul. Presently he was induced to get up and dress. Life was flowing back into him: it would have been as easy to check a rising tide. But still

he refused to look at the problems which one day he must face. He shut his mind and turned away his eyes from them. He would not think of Betty or of Penelope or of the future.

'Time enough to consider all that when I am really well,' he tried to tell himself, wishing secretly that something might happen so that he might not be forced to consider it at all.

At first he sat in his room, and then he began to stray about the house and garden, but before he would do that Arthur had to renew his promise that no one should come.

'I can't be bothered to see anybody or talk to anybody,' Maurice complained. 'I'm all right, but I just want to be let alone.'

'Let alone and forget things a bit,' he murmured half to himself after a pause.

Mrs. Forbes was growing anxious, as was only natural.

'I wonder if there's something more the matter,' she suggested. 'I wonder whether he ought to be seeing another doctor.' Her thought was that if her son had caught some strange foreign disease 'out there' an English country practitioner might not be the best person to consult about it.

'I believe Clifford's death was a great shock to him,' Arthur volunteered. 'All mixed up with his own illness and so on, you know.'

'It must have been,' his mother agreed—she had heard by now of Penelope's cable. 'He hasn't breathed a word about Clifford to me. Has he at all to you?'

'He doesn't talk to me much about anything,' Arthur replied, 'but it is evidently very much on his mind. The first thing he said to me was, 'Clifford's dead.' I didn't tell you at the time because I thought you had enough to worry about. But all that night he said nothing else. He kept on repeating that Clifford was dead and that he died of a fever.'

He stopped there not choosing to repeat the phrase that had most impressed him, the phrase that had shocked Betty so deeply and so strangely.

Women over forty—especially one's own mother—were fragile, ailing, chancy things to be treated with tenderness and care, and on occasion with a little kind duplicity.

'Why doesn't Betty come to see him?' she wondered. 'I believe she might be able to rouse him.'

Rouse him—what a change! That was what one spoke of now as desirable. Such questions were inevitable, and they must be answered. Reluctant as he was to tell the truth, Arthur realised that Betty's absence did need more explanation than it was getting.

'Well, the fact is, I told her it wasn't any good, and that she'd better not come,' he confessed. 'I said Maurice was supposed to rest and not to see anyone.'

He wished to make it clear that it was his fault, not due to any fickleness or heartless indifference on Betty's part.

'Well, perhaps, we'd better talk to the doctor

first,' said Mrs. Forbes, 'but really I think she'd better begin to come now. It seems to me that what he needs is something to give him a little more interest in life.'

Arthur felt no sort of eagerness to explain that he had been made to promise that Betty should not come until Maurice asked for her. For one thing it seemed a needlessly disquieting thing to tell his mother; and for another it tasted to him just a little like a betrayal of his brother's confidence. He had a feeling that when Maurice ceased to be queer he'd feel sick to know that everyone knew how queer he had been.

If only his sister could be here now for a little, the mature, adequate, golden-haired and equable Leila! Unfortunately she was more or less in the act of having yet another baby.

'But Arthur,' Betty pleaded with him when she heard of his dilemma, 'if it would really be better for him for you to break your promise, wouldn't it be better—really more loyal to him—to break it? What is all this about promises, anyway? You had to say "yes" to him to get him quiet and make him sleep.' (Arthur had not mentioned to her the fact that the promises had since been renewed.) 'You never really agreed with him or consented to him. Wasn't it just a little as if someone had said, "If you don't promise to give me a thousand pounds, I'll jump out of the window and break my neck?" I don't call that exactly a real promise, do you?'

They were sitting together on a stile leading into a little wood. They had agreed to meet there, for it

was becoming daily more and more inconvenient for Arthur to go at all often as far as the White's house; for he was the only person whose presence Maurice really tolerated now that he no longer slept almost continuously.

‘Yes, that's quite true in a way,’ Arthur reflected thoughtfully, ‘I've been feeling like that myself. Maurice isn't exactly himself—he's ill and queer, and when people are like that you do have to decide a bit what is best for them, and you can't always be as straight with them as you ordinarily would.’

‘No,’ Betty agreed hopefully, ‘of course you can't. Any more than you expect them to behave quite as sensibly as they ordinarily do.’

‘Only you see it's like this,’ Arthur went on, poking with his stick at one particular dead leaf with an air of savage concentration, ‘It's what Penelope said—there was a lot in that, you know. She said I mustn't do anything to lessen Maurice's confidence in me, that he must be able to feel his home was safe. I've been thinking about that a good deal. Anyone that's ill is pretty helpless, you know; pretty well dependent on the people round them. Of course Maurice is behaving like an ass, he's in a silly state of nerves and it's all ridiculous and all that—but it's real to him.

‘Don't you think—however silly—it might *feel* pretty ghastly to think there was no place where you were safe, and no person you could trust, at a moment when you were helpless and dependent on people? Don't you think it might be rather awful

to feel you were—like a doll, you know, or a baby for that matter—completely in other people's hands—just a thing they could do what they like with—not in command of your own destiny?"

He looked up quickly as he spoke, rather pathetically—rather as the heart-breaking Lizzy sometimes looked.

'In fact, it might do good, but if it didn't it would do such a cursèd lot of harm I daren't risk it.'

Betty was a little comforted, though not altogether convinced. It was good to know that Arthur was really considering his brother's welfare, not sacrificing it to any fantastic loyalty to the letter of his promise.

'You see what I mean,' he went on, 'I'm ready to quarrel with him, to put myself in the wrong, to break a promise which, as you say, was more or less forced out of me. Only if I do that, there's an end of my usefulness to him, and if he *wasn't* pleased to see you—why then there'd be nobody.'

'Well then,' Betty suggested argumentatively, 'if he didn't know you'd allowed it—if he thought you weren't any way to blame——?'

'Oh, I don't know,' sighed Arthur, slashing rather brutally at a head of golden ragweed, 'we'd have to think about it—and I suppose we ought to talk to the doctor first.'

'It isn't what you really do that matters to him,' she insisted, 'it's what he's going to think.'

The idea of deliberate and successful deception was repugnant to him, even when it was a case of de-

ceiving the ‘queer’ for their own good. To break a ridiculous promise openly and honestly was another matter. But Betty was not interested in Arthur’s scruples. She was beginning to feel, ‘I must get at him. Somehow I must get at him. Something is going wrong. Something is going very wrong indeed. I must get at him. I must get at him.’

‘I suppose we meet here just the same to-morrow?’ she asked.

‘Yes. To-morrow morning unless it’s raining. If it rains, in that barn over there.’

They had just parted when Betty turned back and called: ‘I’ve got another idea,’ she said, ‘how about Lizzy?’

‘He’s never even asked after her,’ Maurice confessed gloomily.

‘Well I shall bring her for a walk this way to-morrow morning. And I’m afraid her collar is rather large for her—or will be—and—I hope she won’t find all the doors in your house shut.’

‘All right—somewhere about eleven? He’ll be up by then.’

‘But why not this evening?’ Betty corrected herself. ‘You see, every minute is eternity to poor Lizzy, because she doesn’t look before and after. At least not much. After tea about six.’

Betty reported the substance of this talk to Penelope

‘Arthur is right,’ she said. ‘He was always a very sensible boy. See how bad for Maurice to feel alone with no one he can trust. But you are right, too.

We will make a plan, Betty; never fear. He shall meet you by chance one fine day, and no one be to blame. But Arthur is quite right, it would be very bad that Maurice should quarrel with him.'

CHAPTER VIII

A LOVE SCENE AND ITS SEQUEL

WHEN BETTY TOOK LIZZY OUT THAT EVENING SHE trotted demurely alongside, a perfect little lady, polite, but unenthusiastic. When, however, they passed through Ashton and took the turning to the right she began to pull forward on her lead. Betty had not once ventured to take her that way since she had had charge of her, for fear of raising and disappointing her hopes.

Now every moment it grew clearer that Lizzy knew where she was going and was in a desperate hurry. Her little head and neck strained at the collar, she was almost dragging Betty along.

‘All right darling, I’ll let you go here.’

She had brought her so far, not because she doubted her power to find her own way, but because as far as the village there was often a fair amount of traffic on the road, and Lizzy was in no mood to watch where she was going.

Betty stooped down to undo the lead. Lizzy realised what was happening, and went mad. Her excitement made it impossible to find the fastening.

‘Yap, yap yap!’ she cried shrilly, ‘Quick, quick, quick! Let me go! Let me go!’

‘Keep still you little idiot,’ Betty implored her, but Lizzy was totally unable to keep still. She

jumped, she wriggled, she barked, she sprang up and licked Betty's nose ecstatically, she pawed her all over with muddy paws, she expressed enthusiasm in every way known to her kind.

'You idiot. Keep still.'

Betty hugged her, kissed her nose, received a great lick all over her face, and then at last did succeed in undoing the lead.

'There now, be off with you,' she said straightening herself.

Lizzy bounced up once with a bark of wild appreciation; then, realising she was free, she flew like a well-driven ball.

Betty watched her—an absurd white diminishing speck that seemed to hurtle through the air, not to run on four legs. Across the field she shot her way and disappeared through a hole in the hedge.

'She's got her own short cut, dear little Lizzy.'

Betty turned home. She could not expect to meet Arthur at this time; for this was an hour at which he would be missed; and they both understood very well how much Maurice would resent their constant meetings, their discussion of his progress, and their plans for his welfare. Fellow conspirators they were becoming, guilty and secretive in their movements.

Lizzy was by no means a fool, but she did not make a habit of inquiring whether angels might not fear to tread before she herself rushed in.

Maurice had just had tea with his mother and Arthur, and they had been, as always, tactful and restrained; and these qualities in them were begin-

ning to tell upon his nerves. It is true that anything else would have been unendurable; but he was in no mood to count his blessings. Things, in fact, were so wrong with him that nothing in his surroundings could possibly be right.

He was perfectly aware that his behaviour was odd; he knew they were thinking of him, and he resented it. He believed they watched him anxiously; he observed that they were careful not to appear to do so, and his sense of their forbearance was growing to more than he could stand. He would have liked the world to be completely unaware of his existence; for he was in that state in which one cannot bear to be looked at or spoken about, or even to realise that one may be in the thoughts of other people; and he felt certain that they talked to one another about him when he was out of the room. Moreover their presence and their silence perpetually reminded him of the questions they refrained from asking, and the problems which he would not bring himself to face. They must, of necessity, be wondering why he did not see Betty, why he did not speak of Clifford, and how long he meant to go on behaving like this.

They were waiting—watching—they could not possibly be doing otherwise; and they were treating him like an idiot—it was an implied insult, their failure to criticise him aloud.

He must find some way of ending this, that much was certain. He couldn't go on. He couldn't go on like this. He was a fool ever to have come back; but what could he do, dazed as he was then with

illness, bewildered, weak, and barely sane? Now he must find some excuse to go. Get away—that was it. Right away—anywhere. Leave them to talk and wonder, to go on talking and wondering. Leave them for good. Go away and lose himself. They would continue to whisper and speculate behind his back, but he would go—he would be gone.

So his mind ran, while perfunctorily he ate and drank, and heard their brave, carefully-chosen talk. They did not speak to him so much as to one another, but it was all about subjects which they hoped might interest him. That was all part of their beautiful tact, their patience, their—Oh, damn—their artful understanding of the beastly state his nerves were in. He got up and left them, murmuring some sullen lie about having letters to write, drifted aimlessly into the library, threw himself into a chair and abandoned his soul to hell.

And when he had gone, just as he might have anticipated, Mrs. Forbes and Arthur looked at one another, and Mrs. Forbes sighed. They did not speak, however; the comment was too obvious to them both.

Maurice leant back in his chair. He was tired, and his head was beginning to ache, as it often did. He pressed his fingertips along his forehead just under the roots of his hair, letting the palms of his hands cover his eyes. His mother, Arthur, were forgotten. They and all present things simply slipped out of being. His mind was a jungle of roots and stems and branches over a black swamp where

hidden, unimaginable things lived and stirred—a tangle of striving thoughts that grew and twined and blossomed and expanded, that sank and rotted and rose again.

Pictures then . . . pictures more vivid than life. The whole sickening scene re-enacted for the thousand millionth time. . . .

Then in upon all this broke Lizzy.

He was scarcely aware of a whine and a scuffle before she sprang on him and—jumped, tumbled, rolled, wriggled, and rioted all over him, licking his hands, his neck, his hair, using her strong-clawed paws to uncover his face when she found her tongue insufficiently powerful.

‘Oh it’s you, it’s you, it’s you,’ she seemed to say, ‘It’s you, it’s me, it’s you!’

‘I love you. Oh, I love you. I *do* love, love, love you. *Please* it’s me. Please, please, *please*, it’s me!’

What could he do? She was simply irresistible. What heart could possibly stand against such direct and powerful assault and battery?

‘Why, Lizzy—Lizzy! There, there, don’t eat me, old girl. What, Lizzy? Well, well, well, poor old Lizzy! All right old girl. All right, Lizzy—Well you do seem pleased to see me. But I say, Lizzy, just look what a mess you’ve made of me! Mud in my hair, mud down my neck. Torn my coat, too, you little blighter!’ His hand was beginning to bleed where she had scratched it in her first mad effort to uncover his face.

Lizzy asked no questions. She was not worried about the past. She was not concerned for the future.

'You—me—love, love, love!' That was all she had to say, and every scrap of her body and mind was proclaiming it. The only trouble was that she could not say it fast enough, hard enough, often enough. Her whole soul ached with an inability to express the size, the weight, the awful compelling drive of her emotion.

'Come on, Liz, then, we'll go for a walk.' She bounded and scampered beside him.

'Joy, joy, joy—you—me—joy, love!' Her whole ridiculous little body sang as she leapt and ran and circled, tripping him, blundering into furniture, encumbering his movements.

'Lizzy—Lizzy—it's all the same to you. Nothing in heaven or earth could pull you off!'

Wonderful love—dependent on what?

One might grow old, ugly, stupid, wicked, tiresome. One might bore or disgust one's dearest friends. Anything might happen; and still it would make no difference to Lizzy. She did not question, she did not criticise, she did not scheme or analyse or wonder. She just loved him. She simply *was* her love. While she lived nothing could alter that.

'That was a great idea of yours, to loose Lizzy on him,' Arthur reported to Betty next morning. 'He's been almost human since. He takes her round the garden and shies sticks for her, and feeds her on mutton chops under the table when no one's looking.'

'He was pleased to see her?' Betty asked tremulously.

‘Yes, I think he was. She really is rather hard to resist, you know. She simply won’t leave him for a minute. I suppose for fear he disappears again. She likes to lie actually on his foot when he’s sitting down, which you would think must be uncomfortable for both of them; and she has an awfully taking trick of crawling up on his knee and pretending not to all the time. She sits looking at him—you know, that fearsomely sentimental way dogs have—then she lays one paw on his knee, then the other, and gazes at him for a bit like that, standing on her hind legs on the floor. Then gradually she crawls up, dragging the whole of her in a funny apologetic sort of way as if she were saying, ‘Please I’m not really here at all, I’ve only just followed my paw, which somehow got here by mistake.’

‘Oh don’t!’ cried Betty sharply. ‘Don’t, I can’t stand it. *I can’t stand it.*’

Poor Arthur stared at her in that hurt, puzzled way which she was accustomed to find half amusing and half touching.

‘Aren’t I a fool?’ she laughed, mocking herself while she dabbed her eyes with a handkerchief. ‘Aren’t I a pretty fool!’ she laughed. ‘I’m jealous. Jealous. I—me—jealous of Lizzy. Oh, Arthur, isn’t it funny? Why don’t you laugh?’

‘Arthur,’ she went on hysterically, ‘if you don’t laugh—if you don’t say something—I shall die—burst—have a fit!’

‘Good Lord, Betty,’ murmured Arthur blankly, realising that his ally was losing her nerve, and that she was minding—minding most horribly,

most cruelly, most evilly—the fact that she could not see Maurice—that Maurice did not want to see her.

‘*Good Lord!*’ Betty repeated, ‘Good Lord! O Arthur, how blissfully and adorably inadequate you always are! Were you born like it, or did it take a lot of practice?’

He blinked at her and began to apologise clumsily.

‘Betty—well—I say—I—we’ve been forgetting you.’

‘Oh, no you haven’t—you haven’t—or if you have it doesn’t matter—I don’t want to be considered. I’m all right. I’m utterly, completely all right. Only doesn’t the gratuitous *beastliness* of life just get up and hit you sometimes? It does me. Look here, though—see—I’m *perfectly* sensible now.’ As proof of this statement she gave her face a final polish with her handkerchief and put it away.

‘Perfectly sensible. But look here—did Maurice *ask* for Lizzy? Had he ever seemed to want to see her?’

‘No,’ Arthur admitted, seeing well where this line of questioning would lead.

‘But yet he was glad to see her? And it’s been a good idea? And you think it has done him good?’

‘Yes.’

‘Well—well then—don’t you see? Mightn’t he be rather glad to see me?’

Arthur did not know what to say.

‘He hadn’t said he *didn’t* want to see Lizzy,’ was the answer which he might have given yesterday, but now it seemed that the whole aspect of the

matter was changing. His ally, his associate, his equal, was becoming a young woman with nerves and feelings and so on. She was on her way to qualify for a place in that other category of people who had to be considered and taken care of and looked after, like his mother and like Maurice. How lucky that this had not happened until now, when things were really beginning to look up a little! One had, it was perfectly true, been making rather heavy demands on Betty—treating her a little brutally, all things considered. But then, of course, one had thought she could stand it.

‘I don’t suppose it will be long now,’ he explained hurriedly. ‘He’s coming to life—he really is—he’s beginning to walk about—with Lizzy—instead of just sitting round. He’s awfully weak still and gets tired. He—I mean to say—he’s really not up to much.’

His eyes implored Betty not to make things painful and difficult—not yet—not yet.

‘But don’t you think,’ she put in with a strange new coolness in her voice, ‘that he may be almost beginning to wonder how it is that I never come near him at all?’

‘Well—but——’

‘Oh I do know you’ve promised him I shan’t, and of course he’d expect you to try to keep your promise; but don’t you think he must be beginning to think it a little queer that you are able to stop me?’

‘Well—I—I hadn’t exactly thought of that. Naturally, he knows we are all anxious to give him what

he wants—that is—I mean to say—to do what seems best for him.’

‘Oh yes—naturally,’ Betty agreed. ‘Naturally, naturally,’ she muttered as she turned away. When Arthur had gone she walked slowly down the road towards the village, thinking it all out as she went. ‘Naturally—naturally!’ She kept repeating the word to herself, although her mind was busy with other things.

So Maurice was beginning to go out, beginning to walk about the garden and the grounds with Lizzy. Soon he would walk farther. Trust Lizzy to see to that.

(Lizzy! Impossible not to love her for her love for him! Impossible not to be insanely, sickeningly jealous of her!)

She decided not to strain poor Arthur’s pathetically divided loyalty. Not to go to the house, where she might have to search ignominiously from room to room—where she might meet Mrs. Forbes, Arthur or some of the servants, and be driven to explain her pitiful, ridiculous quest.

No, she would meet Maurice out of doors—by chance—quite by chance—some time when he was out with Lizzy.

Yes, that was what she meant to do. That was what she would do. Yes, it was settled. It was all completely settled.

Such a chance was bound to occur sooner or later. All she had to do was to happen to come this way whenever she went out. She would drive to the village—put up the trap—and then—just go for a walk.

When she got home she felt Penelope's eyes upon her, and knew she had been crying. It was mean, she felt, to keep Penelope in the dark, watching and waiting and wondering what had been said and what it was that one was keeping from her. One must tell Penelope everything however small it made one feel.

Everything? No—one couldn't tell anybody everything, but enough—as much as one could.

'Yes, I've been crying, Pen,' she declared defiantly. 'Maurice is better and everything is going on swimmingly; but I've been crying because I'm utterly miserable and ragingly jealous of Lizzy—you know—the little dog that was here.'

It seemed indecent to mention her own little troubles in front of Penelope, even to think of them; but one couldn't go out and meet Arthur and come back looking as if one had cried and say nothing.

'I am a fool, aren't I?' she said, then summarised her conversation with Arthur.

'My poor Betty, my poor Betty,' Penelope murmured in her gentle, coaxing way, 'No, you are not a fool. You are a dear girl; it is very hard to be patient when one hopes so much—such wonders—everything.'

'But do not be jealous of poor Lizzy. She is a dog. She cannot talk. She cannot ask questions or say the wrong thing. You do not know what it is to fear the one you love will say the wrong thing. He could not fear you, my silly Betty, if he did not love you.'

'Pen you are an angel,' cried Betty hugging her suddenly with fierce compunction. 'Pen, darling'—she hadn't meant to say this but yet she did—'Pen—this can't go on.'

'My dear child, no, you are right.'

Betty unfolded her schemes to Penelope.

'A chance encounter, you are right.' Penelope agreed. 'He shall not expect you and agitate himself beforehand. He shall not have time to think what he will say or what you will ask.'

'And you, Betty,' she went on, 'you must not ask questions or try to make him tell.'

'I shan't know what to say,' Betty confessed.

'Follow your heart. Say what comes most natural. Or say nothing. Let him see you love him.'

In spite of herself Betty began to cry again.

'Darling Pen. You are a love. I do feel mean.'

Penelope laughed suddenly.

'Dear child, do you think I would change with you? Ah, you understand so little—nothing at all.'

CHAPTER IX

‘LOVERS’ MEETING.’

IT WAS LIZZY HERSELF WHO ACTUALLY BROUGHT them together, and that not accidentally or by the way, but in a fashion that was the outcome of her past and theirs. Next to her master—and, indeed, almost as one part or aspect of his varied perfections—she loved long, informal country walks, through woods, up hills, down dales, across fields where rabbits scampered and swallows skimmed, by thickets where things squeaked and rustled, and along banks and hedgerows where one enchanting smell succeeded another. She loved to prance out beside him early in the morning, and feel that the whole day was ahead and the whole world before her, to scour the country in pursuit of smells and sensations, to chivvy anything that would run away, to fetch sticks and share sandwiches, to dig out tempting and likely-looking holes, to experience the thrill of almost imagining herself left behind and lost, and then, after a mad gallop, to have the breathless joy of overtaking her party again. She loved at last to come home, tired out and deeply contented, to sleep and to dream it all over again.

She had taken many such varied adventurous, delightful walks during the months before Maurice went abroad, which—though she did not appreciate

this point—were also the months preceding and following his engagement.

Now since he had come back there had been nothing of the kind. He had loitered about the garden, throwing balls or sticks to make her run. They had wandered round the field together. She had just succeeded in tempting him down to the stream where the water rats lived, or ever such a little way along the lane. Then he would sit down and rest, and, after that, turn home. He was attentive and affectionate, and yet something was missing. Something was wrong. Something wasn't quite, *quite* right.

Then suddenly one day it was there. A glimpse through a hedge—a whiff on the breeze—her mingled sense of her master and of Betty, and the chord of associations was struck once again. Betty had been with them during those wonderful heavenly, hilarious days. They dwelt together in the back of her memory, Betty, her master and those long, blissful expeditions. They were quite unaware of one another still, but in her keen nose their scents met and mingled, waking forgotten emotions, stirring her to wild, headlong excitement.

Off she darted down the lane, her nose on the ground, her whole soul on the business in hand. Maurice watched her smiling. He supposed she had smelt some peculiarly thrilling rat or rabbit. Round the corner she flew, in such a scurry that her hind legs all but outran her forelegs every minute.

'Hullo, Liz!' gasped Betty, quite pale, and with a thumping heart. Lizzy sprang up in her exuberant

fashion, muddled the front of Betty’s dress, tore a hole in her stocking, and fell over herself in her eagerness to express appreciation and entreaty.

‘There, Lizzy—gently—steady’—soothed Betty, who had not the heart to scold. But Lizzy was not there for mere talk and idle endearments. No dog that feels itself in charge of a party can bear to see that party failing to keep together. She barked invitingly, and then ran ahead a little way, stopped and looked back—tense—tail quivering, eyes imploring.

‘Yap!’

She ran a little farther, then danced back, persuasive and insistent.

‘Come along. Come along. Come along. *Please* come along. Oh, I am so worried. So worried. They won’t, won’t, *won’t* keep together. My people won’t keep together.’

Betty followed.

They had nearly reached the place where Maurice was waiting, but they were still hidden by a bend in the lane when Lizzy darted ahead and came scampering up to him, signifying wild excitement about something of vast importance in every wag of her tail and every ingratiating wriggle of her muscular body.

‘Was it a rat then, Liz? Or was it only an elephant?’ he inquired sympathetically, stooping down to fondle her.

But Lizzy whined and fidgeted and scarcely accepted his caress.

‘Something to say,’ she pleaded. ‘Important—*so* important. Please try to understand. Please. Please.

Please. *I mean something!*' Then back she ran the way she had come, giving him a backward glance as though begging him to follow.

Idly he strolled after her, amused and touched and wondering. Round the bend of the road he met Betty face to face. He stood, startled and irresolute, his colour coming and going, while Lizzy darted forward and once more jumped round Betty, demanding attention and approval.

'Look what I've done! Look what I've done! Here he is! Aren't I clever?'

'Oh,' said Betty, and then again, 'Oh,' and then after a pause and more faintly, 'Oh, Maurice!'

'I'm a fool!' thought Maurice, I'm a fool. Oh, what a fool I've been!

Desperately he wished that he was somewhere—*anywhere*—else; that he had had the sense to go away days and days ago—sense to have died before this happened—the sense never to have been born——

'Oh, Maurice!' Betty repeated, 'Maurice!' Thereby fulfilling most exactly Penelope's injunctions to follow her heart and say what came most natural.

'I must get through this,' thought Maurice. 'Must get through this somehow—without a scene. Yes, without a scene.' Such were the words his brain formed, but they were not at all a fair example of what was in his mind which was suddenly a turmoil, a chaos of darkness and sound and heaving waters.

'Through this without a scene——'

He held on to those words as the proverbial drowning man clutches straws. He must have been near fainting for a second or so. Dizzily he was aware

that Betty had run to him and taken hold of his arm; and he could distinguish nothing of joy or of pain in the stress and whirl of his emotions.

‘Oh, Maurice,’ she babbled, ‘Oh, Maurice, how lovely to see you back! How lovely! How wonderful! I can’t tell you—I can’t speak—I can’t——’

‘Don’t, Betty!’ he cried suddenly—involuntarily—a mere meaningless cry of pain.

‘Don’t? Oh don’t what?’ Betty overflowed. ‘Don’t be happy? But I can’t help it. How can I help it? Be happy too, Maurice, please be happy, too!’

‘Don’t, Betty,’ he begged her. ‘I can’t bear it.’

His tone steadied her more than his words. He spoke from such a depth of suffering.

Jealous or sympathetic or worried or merely excited, Lizzy danced round them barking—unnoticed.

‘Maurice—Oh, Maurice!’

Then, as he did not answer, ‘Be quiet, Lizzy,’ for suddenly she found the dog’s shrill noise unendurable.

Lizzy subsided—wriggled—apologised and lay down on the grass by the road watching them expectantly, with her mouth open and her tongue out.

‘Betty!’

He did not speak as if he did not love her, only from the depths of some unimaginable despair. Only as though the world were utterly at an end.

She came straight to the point. He was drowning, she saw that, and it was up to her to throw him a rope.

‘Maurice’—she hesitated, ‘didn’t we settle before you went away that when you came back we should be married this—*last*—summer? Well, dear—I—I don’t want to wait any more.’

‘Betty—dear——’ He began pleadingly, and it was as though she felt him coming. He loved her. She knew it. He loved her.

‘Betty—I——’

But he broke off there and turned away.

‘Oh, I can’t bear it,’ he sobbed.

‘But there’s nothing to bear but your own fancies,’ she assured him earnestly.

(Love—that was the main thing. That was all that mattered, so she unquestioningly believed. If he loved her and she him then everything must be well.)

‘Your own fancies. . . . Let them go, and be happy.’

He looked at her desperately and entreatingly, like an animal in danger that begs you to save it; and then covered his eyes with his hands, turning away. She scarcely caught the word he muttered as he turned, ‘Cliff . . .’

She was fighting she hardly knew what—strange, unwholesome fancies, morbid, exaggerated remorse. Fighting a spectre which she could feel in the way, though she could not tell its shape or nature.

She caught up the word she had heard him say, and used it as a weapon of attack.

‘Uncle Cliff would hate to see you wretched like this,’ she told him steadily, ‘you know he would.’

‘Cliff’s dead,’ he murmured, without looking at her.

She must fight, for she wasn’t winning now—wasn’t even holding her ground. It seemed it was her dead uncle she had to fight, who would have wished to be her helper. Quite irrelevantly she realised for the first time how very fond she had been of him. And he, always so jolly to her.

‘Yes, he’s dead,’ she answered, ‘but—but—he wasn’t afraid to die. Maurice—he—he doesn’t mind being dead.’

‘Don’t!’ he cried again, as if that hurt him unbearably.

‘But he’d be sorry if he could see you now,’ she continued remorselessly. He had moved as if to go, but she held his arm.

‘I can’t listen to you,’ he faltered; ‘let me go.’

But she held on and spoke with a touch of anger.

‘This isn’t right. This isn’t fair or kind. It’s not fair to Uncle Clifford or just to his memory—simply because he happens to be dead—which he can’t help—to go on like this. As if he’d grudge you being alive or being happy. He was too . . .’

Maurice interrupted her.

‘I *can’t*. Cliff’s dead. He’s dead. It wasn’t——’ but, as if suddenly recollecting himself, he started and looked at her, a strange, scared look.

‘Yes, Betty—it is—it—it—*was* my fault.’

‘Oh, Maurice!’ she sighed.

Relief and pity were uppermost in her mind; pity for Maurice, whose remorse and misery were so great that all this while he had denied them and avoided her, and relief because at last the enemy had come out into the open and could be met fairly.

She was not unprepared for this. Arthur had warned her. She had thought about it. She knew more or less what she meant to say, and collected herself to speak.

'Fault? Your fault? But nothing is any one person's fault. His or yours. It was his fault you went; you'd never have gone without him. And you took risks, I daresay both of you, with your own lives or each other's. Think—just think. If it had happened the other way would you have wanted Uncle Cliff to feel . . .'

He would not let her go on, he rounded on her suddenly as if she had slandered the dead.

'You don't know what you are saying. It could never have happened the other way. Never. Cliff was . . .'

He broke off and ended lamely.

'Well, Cliff was always Cliff.'

Betty was too ignorant of the facts to attempt to pursue that line. She shifted her ground in order to talk of the things she did know something about.

'Uncle Clifford was most awfully pleased about our engagement——' she began.

How wide her words seemed of any mark to him, how beside the point, how futile, how out of date! He did not interrupt her, but she noted his change of expression, his fretful movement of rejection; and realised that she was taking the wrong line.

'I feel sure,' she said, shifting her ground again, seeking any line of approach, 'that you blame yourself more than he would blame you.'

Blame? He took fire at that word inconsequently

and unreasonably. Blame? Had he said he was to blame? He recoiled from the confession he seemed to have made, recoiled from the thought her word suggested.

‘Did I say he’d blame me? No, of course he wouldn’t. He died of a fever. It wasn’t my fault.’

Betty’s heart went cold. It was his over-emphatic denial of guilt that shocked and frightened her above all things, but she answered him steadily and bravely.

‘All right, Maurice. That’s all right. Uncle Clifford is dead, and I’m sorry. You are alive, and I’m glad. There’s nothing——’

But he interrupted her again, recoiling back from the lie he had told and from her acceptance of it or her indifference to it.

‘No, Betty. That’s not true. It was. I’ve been lying to you. Lying because I wanted to deceive myself. It *was* my fault.’ She felt helpless in the tangle and swirl of his emotions. She loved him, and ‘my fault,’ or ‘not my fault’ seemed nothing but words. Uncle Clifford was dead, nothing could alter that. Nothing could make it more or less or different.

‘Now listen to me,’ she insisted, ‘there’s nothing on earth you can’t tell me if you want to; but there’s nothing you need. One minute you say it was your fault, the next it wasn’t. Well I’m afraid I don’t much care. I loved Uncle Clifford and I can’t think of his death that way. He was your friend, and you are as sorry as I am. His death is a big thing to us all. In some ways you will miss him more than I shall.’

'You don't understand,' he complained desolately. He felt it was all words against the one potent reality on earth, his sense of guilt and pain.

'But I think I do,' she replied. 'I think you feel you failed him.'

'And if I had?' he took her up with a kind of bitter eagerness, 'Could you bear it if I had failed him really badly?'

'I——' she wavered before the sudden fierceness of his questioning and the sharp intensity of his pain. 'Oh, why ask about me?'

'But I do, I do. That is what I ask.'

'You feel you failed him?' she evaded his question a moment; 'I don't suppose you did really——'

His hurt, rejected look forced her to face the matter.

'Well—if you did—I don't care. Do you understand? *I don't care*. I don't even want to hear about it. I'd rather not.'

He looked at her with a kind of wonder, she felt she was gaining ground and pressed her advantage. 'I love you,' she went on. 'I'll marry you to-morrow if you like. What happened out there—all that—it's nothing. Nothing to me. What do I know? How could I judge? Safe at home here all the time. Besides—besides—however you failed him—if you did—I'd likely enough have done it worse myself. I'm not brave, I'm not clever, I'm not anything—and——'

'Oh, don't you see? Love has nothing to do with all that. Can't you be made to understand that I don't care? It doesn't touch me. I don't think of it.'

‘Oh but you are wide of it. You don’t know . . .’

‘I don’t need to know, I don’t wish to know,’ she interrupted him urgently; ‘I haven’t the very faintest wish to hear anything about it. I just know that you are here—you—the man I love. It isn’t what you’ve done or not done I care about. All that’s nothing to me. Nothing—nothing. You and me—that’s what matters to us now. Just us. You and me. The way we are and the way we feel. Nothing you’ve *done*. Nothing that’s *happened*. Just *us*.’

She believed for a moment that she was making an impression—and then—a faint change of expression—a slight gesture of negation—

‘Very well then,’ she conceded, ‘if you can’t believe me any other way, just try me. Tell me the whole thing. You’ll see it won’t make any difference. He died of fever, you say?’

Her over-emphasis combined with his growing fatigue to defeat her.

‘Yes. There’s nothing to tell. He died of a fever. I blamed myself, but I couldn’t have saved him.’ (Couldn’t have saved him, that at least was true—most likely.)

‘That’s what I believe,’ Betty replied, conquering her instinctive distaste for his excuses. ‘But I can see, all the same, that you don’t quite believe it yourself.’

‘I think you feel sick with yourself because something went wrong. Something you did, or didn’t do, or forgot or muddled. I don’t suppose it really was so dreadfully your fault. But if it was—whatever it was—that’s all one to me.’

(Of course she was still wide of the mark . . . but yet, if her words meant anything at all. . . . He was growing tired. . . .)

'You mean, Betty—you're trying to say—you're wanting to tell me—that *nothing* could put you off?'

'Nothing you could do,' she assured him confidently. 'Some things you couldn't.'

A wave of remorse—of shame—disgust. What did Betty know of what he could or could not do?

She saw the change in his face and began to plead with him for himself. 'Try to think of this more as Uncle Clifford himself would. He was never hard on anyone.'

Words and words and words. All so useless and so grotesque, through her misunderstanding of all that had happened. He felt a need to end the matter, to tidy it up, put it away.

'You are right, Betty' (one must make an end of this scene, somehow); 'one gets to feel silly about things, especially if one's not well.' (Too tired and too sick to argue now, he felt only anxious to finish and to hide.) 'There was really nothing I could have done.'

'Yes.' He looked up and spoke suddenly with full conviction, almost like someone telling the truth for the first time. 'He'd almost certainly have been dead by now whatever I'd done.' (Something to say—to end it—and then go away—escape. He felt Betty's questioning eyes upon him and hurried on explanatorily.) 'It was like this—he died while I was asleep. Of course I ought to have managed to keep awake.'

Betty had a vision of how the thing might have happened, and then of her uncle himself hearing this shamed confession as she heard it now.

‘Poor old fellow. Fagged out’; she commented suddenly. ‘That’s what Uncle Clifford would have said, isn’t it?’

‘Don’t!’ he shuddered, ‘you spoke just like him.’ (Horrible the way an unnoticed family likeness may spring out at one unexpectedly.)

‘Sorry!’ Betty apologised.

She realised that the phrase her uncle would have used had leapt so vivid and living into her mind that, quite unconsciously, she had spoken it with his very intonation. It was a thoroughly tactless thing to do in the circumstances.

‘Sorry, but still that *is* what he would have said, and how he would have felt, isn’t it?’

Maurice nodded without speaking.

‘You couldn’t help it,’ she went on. ‘You wouldn’t be blaming him for the same thing,’

He could not bear that suggestion, could not let it pass.

‘No—no. He’d never have done it.’

‘Oh don’t be silly!’ she interrupted him, suddenly growing impatient. ‘Oh can’t you see? All this about Uncle Clifford. All this fuss! How he’d hate it; I tell you it’s not respectful. I tell you he doesn’t *mind* being dead.’

‘He never——’

‘Well he *doesn’t mind* any way. And he always hated a fuss. You know he did,’

'Yes, didn't he?' Maurice agreed weakly. A deadly weariness was coming over him. He must get away.

'It's decent of you Betty,' he stammered, 'to take it like this. I say, though, you know, I ought to be getting back. They'll wonder where I am.'

'Very well. But it is all right isn't it? You won't worry?'

'No—no—I won't worry. I'd better be going home. Then suddenly he knew he couldn't leave it like that. He just couldn't leave it like that. He just couldn't. It wouldn't do. An imperative necessity to humble, to trample, to utterly blacken and vilify himself swept over him.

'No. Betty—no—hang it all—it wasn't like that. Not a bit—not a bit like what you think——'

'There's no need to tell me,' she assured him again. I don't want to hear. And it can't alter my love.'

'No—I'd rather you didn't,' she added, shrinking back with sudden, uncanny alarm as he seemed on the point of speaking.

Quite possibly he would have forced the truth upon her against her will, but at that moment he looked up and saw Arthur coming down the lane towards them.

Mrs. Forbes had grown anxious not seeing Maurice anywhere about the house or garden, and had sent Arthur out to look for him; and Arthur, of course, knew nothing of Betty's scheming or of Lizzy's activity as go-between. So, instead of the confession that was overflowing in his heart, 'Here's Arthur,' Maurice panted, 'coming to tell me I shall be late for lunch.'

‘Come back with us, won’t you?’ he suggested, feeling that something of the kind must be said.

But Betty saw that he hoped she would refuse, and did so on the grounds that she had not said she would be out, and would be expected home. She reddened, and her voice grew thick, for, in excusing herself, she had all but mentioned Penelope’s name, and had consciously refrained from doing so. For some reason that circumstance struck her as sinister and full of ill omen.

Lizzy followed her master meekly and in a chastened mood. Something had gone wrong. Something had gone very wrong indeed. She, too, realised, as well as Betty, that there was more amiss than she understood.

CHAPTER X

‘ALL OUR YESTERDAYS.’

BETTY WALKED SLOWLY BACK TO THE VILLAGE wondering how much she should tell Penelope. No use inflicting upon her this vague, horrible sense of some unspecified thing amiss. No good repeating Maurice’s ghastly attempts at self-justification. But facts—one had no right to withhold facts from Penelope.

She tried to collect her facts and marshall them in order. What, after all, was it that Maurice had told her that had made such an extraordinary impression on her mind?

Uncle Clifford had died of a fever. Maurice felt himself to blame because he had been asleep when it actually happened. That was simple enough—nothing there one need hesitate to tell. The real difficulty would be to account for having so few facts to repeat. Just that—in the air—‘Uncle Clifford died of a fever; Maurice was asleep when he died——’

Penelope would wonder what one had been talking of all the time. She could not but think it strange that one had found out so little of all she must be longing to know. Cruelly selfish she must think it in view of her patient and generous self-effacement.

'Maurice doesn't seem at all well,' she rehearsed. 'And one can see that he has been terribly upset by the whole business.' Would that do? Would that be enough? Would that satisfy Penelope for the moment, or would she still feel that there was something strange about it all?

Something strange? Her premonition of Penelope's dissatisfaction and her uncertainty of how she should meet it forced upon Betty a clearer sense of her own. She was no longer able to imagine that she was merely trying to spare Penelope's feelings. Quite definitely she was scheming to conceal something which she herself was feeling.

'Maurice is still very ill,' she found herself reasoning, 'and he has had a great shock and undergone a terrible strain. He has hardly begun to get over all that. Uncle Clifford died of a fever; Maurice was probably ill at the time—certainly exhausted, anxious, not at all in a mood to view dispassionately any failure on his own part. At any rate he fell asleep.'

'Well now,' she concluded to herself, 'though he knows he isn't really responsible for Uncle Clifford's death, he can't get rid of the feeling that he is to blame.' That sounded reasonable and coherent; but was she practising what she meant to say, or was she trying to convince herself?

The feeling that she must be careful not to let Penelope form this impression or that impression was forcing her to realise more and more clearly what her own impressions had been.

'After all, there's nothing so very improbable in that,' she found herself reflecting as she rehearsed

her effects. 'Nothing improbable,' so she comforted herself, 'and nothing new.'

'Nothing improbable'—her use of those words emphasised to herself her unformulated sense of dissatisfaction.

'Nothing improbable—no real reason why it should not satisfy Penelope.'

It was her own discomfort that was new, her own uneasy awareness of something behind, of something untold. That was what she must keep from Penelope; not anything Maurice had said but what she herself was beginning to feel.

One phase of their horrible interview haunted her with a suggestion of some meaning not yet grasped. Maurice's manner had suddenly changed as he assured her that, whatever he had done, Clifford would almost certainly be dead by now. Everything else he had spoken from a divided mind, conscience or instinct telling him one thing and reason another; but those words he had spoken without reserve, with a completeness of conviction that by contrast showed up everything else. Betty decided to suppress them in reporting to Penelope, even though without the manner in which he spoke they would not be so terribly revealing.

But more disquieting than this which she decided not to repeat, there was one thing on which she would not allow even her own mind to dwell, and that was the sharp, insulted way in which Maurice had taken fire when she had implied the possibility of her uncle's failing him as he had failed her uncle. There was something about that—

some possible significance—which she shrank from understanding.

She walked slowly, giving herself time to think. When she reached the village it was already past lunch time. Penelope would be wondering where she was. Or would she even be wondering? Perhaps not. She must surely guess what had been going on, and she would be all on fire to hear what had passed.

Poor Penelope, hoping so eagerly and yet so patiently for some word of her husband.

That was the real significance of Maurice’s unlucky failure to keep awake. Perhaps Uncle Clifford had been conscious just before he died.

She had put up the pony-trap in the village, as she had done every day since she took to lying in wait for Maurice. The pony was a pampered family pet; always very lazy on the outward journey, but now eager to get home. Betty’s heart sank as she drew near the house. Penelope would run out to meet her in her eager, impulsive way, ‘Well—well—have you seen him?’ she would ask, panting with eagerness and haste. Her small, alert face would be flushed, her eyes bright, her ridiculous black veil disordered, askew, hampering the eager gestures of her hands. And one would know how she was hoping—longing—thirsting for some message, for some least little word, and one would have no answer. ‘Nothing, nothing at all. Nothing for you. Maurice was asleep when he died.’

Then for Penelope the silence of death would begin.

All down the last hill Betty was expecting her; for the white road was visible from the upper windows of the house. Penelope must guess where she had been, and why she was so long delayed. She must be waiting—fretting—watching the road—with that strange, feverish, uncomplaining endurance that Betty found so unbearably pathetic. As though she felt it natural one should think of one's own love first, but yet hoped that afterwards one might remember her.

Betty was on the edge of expectation all the time—a moving edge, like the crest of a wave, that does not break though every moment it seems about to do so.

All down the hill with a cold and sinking heart. In at the gate and up the drive. The crunch of gravel was unmistakable, she knew. It seemed impossible that Penelope did not hear her. She felt something sinister about this lack of response, this absence of interest in her movements. She did not drive round to the stable but jumped down at the front door, full of vague uneasiness. Agnes met her in the porch.

'Oh, Miss Betty,' she said, 'I am glad to see you back. A letter came for the mistress by this morning's post. A letter with a foreign post mark, and she's shut herself up in her room, and says she won't be needing any lunch.'

Betty caught her breath with a gasp at mention of the letter. To-day was mail day! How extraordinary that one should have forgotten it!

For months one had made an unvarying rule of

being in at post time on mail day! But to-day when she woke in the morning it had not been the day when one would perhaps have a letter that she had greeted, but—like yesterday and the day before and all the other days lately—the day when one might perhaps contrive one’s chance encounter with Maurice!

And—yes, it was just possible, though only just—if they had written the same time that they cabled and had been lucky in catching the mail——

‘I’ll see if she’ll let me in,’ said Betty. ‘I’ll go up at once.’

‘Will you be wanting the pony and trap again?’ asked Agnes with a subtle air of respectful and indulgent reproof.

(The reproof was well merited; for the pony had found some large polyanthus plants, that were making a pathetic attempt to anticipate the spring by sending up a few poor heads of bloom, and he liked the taste.)

‘No—no—let someone see to that,’ replied Betty in a bewildered dream as she went upstairs to Penelope’s room.

‘Who is that?’ cried Penelope’s voice.

‘Ah, Betty! Come in, Betty. Come in dear child. I thought it was Agnes to say that I must eat my lunch. She is so sympathetic, the dear, good Agnes; and to show her sympathy she has no way but to make me eat when I am not hungry, to light a great big fire when the day is already too warm, or to put two hot bottles in my bed at night when one is too many.

‘Ah, she is a good soul, but she has not the gift of expressing her heart except in these three ways.’

Words—a torrent of words—a mere overflow from some intensity of feeling.

Penelope had been crying, but she did not look unhappy. Her face was flushed and eager. She spoke fast, stumbling over her syllables and mispronouncing them slightly, as she did only when very much excited.

‘Ah, Betty, my Betty,’ she went on drawing her into the room, ‘can you believe it? There is a letter! A letter Clifford had written to me. See. A letter, it is his writing!’

‘Then——’ Betty began dizzily, almost choking with amazement; but fortunately she did not put into words the first wild idea that Penelope’s statement called up in her mind.

‘He wrote to me,’ Penelope ran on, ‘he had the thought to write to me, and they have found the letter and sent it. See, it was in this envelope addressed to me in his very own writing, and they enclosed it in another with this letter from the man who found it.’

She held out to Betty poor Layland’s laboured effort, ‘See, a long letter; it is good of him to write so much. You shall read that, I have not read it yet.’

‘But this—this is what Clifford himself wrote me. Look, it is his writing.’

She offered it a moment for Betty to see, but then drew it away. ‘No—no! I cannot allow you to read it.’

Next moment she relented suddenly. ‘Not anyone *except* you.’

‘Yes, yes—you shall see it. But presently. Not *now*. Not to-day.’

Clifford’s writing was bold and clear. In the brief glimpse she had, Betty noticed the date; and that gave her a strange shock, for it proved that he had been alive several weeks after the night when Penelope woke screaming that he was dead. The point seemed entirely immaterial now. Penelope had been right all the same, and they had been wrong. It was all one now, it was all one in the past.

It was as though time flowed by, a living stream, over the little edge that was the present, that was oneself; and then sank into the dead pool of the past. There had been a moment when Penelope was mistaken about Clifford’s death, but time had corrected her mistake. It was all one, all past—contemporaneous—now.

‘Shall I read this then?’ showing the covering letter which Penelope had given her.

Penelope nodded.

‘Yes—read. And tell me after. I have just glanced, that is all.’

She sat down on the bed, fondling her own treasure, reading it again and again, not kissing it but pressing it against her heart. There seemed to be a great lot of it, several large sheets very closely written and crossed in some places. It did strike Betty that Clifford had written rather at length for a man dying of fever; but before her mind had framed a question the probable answer presented

itself. No doubt a great part of the letter had been written before he began to be seriously ill. He often did write when he was not able to post, noting things down from day to day while they were fresh in his mind.

She realised that Penelope had not even noticed the disparity between the date of her own premonition and that of the letter, and that if she did it would mean nothing to her. It did, in fact, mean nothing at all. Sequence was a thing that belonged to the living, ever-moving present. All this was over and gone by.

Betty was vaguely teased by the knowledge that this sense of the stillness and amorphous solidarity of the past had been expressed in better words than she could find. They came to her without seeking while her conscious mind was still following the sense of Layland's and McKay's letters.

'For a thousand years in Thy sight are but as yesterday, when it is past, and as a watch in the night. Thou carriest them away as with a flood; they are as a sleep.'

She pulled herself together, and concentrated her thoughts upon what she was reading.

Layland's letter was touching in a way; he was so completely in the dark, so anxious to find something to say that might comfort the widow, so totally ignorant of how to set about it. In spite of Penelope's comment, it was short, and it was written in haste to catch the mail. The writer had never met Clifford White, but knew him by reputation. A parcel was to follow containing a few personal

belongings that had been found with the body. His remarks were few and conventional. What he evidently regarded as a beautiful and consoling fact—the gem of all he had to offer—came last.

‘As I understand Mr. White was a Catholic, I have made arrangements for him to be buried in the grounds of the old Portuguese Mission Church. It is a beautiful and peaceful spot which has been consecrated ground since the sixteenth century.’

‘Good gracious!’ thought Betty. Then inconsequently she thought of Arthur.

‘Poor fellow,’ she thought, ‘he does want to say something really cheering!’

She pictured him, young and worried, with Arthur’s hurt, puzzled eyes glancing up at the clock—he must finish before the minute hand reached the half hour, or he would miss the mail—then at his paper—he must say something. He must find something to say.

And of course her uncle wasn’t a Catholic—unless indeed he had become one quite lately, and she saw no reason to suppose he had. She wondered where poor Mr. Layland had got the idea. Uncle Clifford and Pen had never shown any signs of being anything in particular. It was probably just a mistake.

And the writer, he was so pleased with himself!

‘Well, what does he say?’ Penelope asked her at last.

With an apologetic sense of incongruity Betty read the letter.

‘It is beautiful, the old church; I remember it,’ Penelope remarked.

Betty was startled; for the church must have belonged to the childhood of which she never spoke. Perhaps this Layland man was right to mention it after all.

‘Stucco, and painted blue. Beautiful in the evening through the trees.’

Suddenly Betty had a fleeting vision of something strange—still—remote. Blue—dull, dim blue—between slender, leaning palms. One would think for a moment that it was a glimpse of a curious, opaque evening sky when one saw it first in the evening behind the black stems; then coming nearer one would see the real sky behind, a pale, fading opal.

‘Was that near your home?’ she asked shyly.

‘Oh no—no. But once he took me there. It is beautiful.’ She seemed to brood for a moment on its beauty, or on some association it had for her, and then added in a matter-of-fact, explanatory tone, ‘But of course that would really only be his bones.’ She was silent a moment, and then went on with apparent irrelevance, ‘But how he did love flowers.’

Betty lacked Penelope’s background. She did not know that there were no flowers round the old church, and that Penelope’s mind had passed to the orchids which her husband loved and went to seek, and into which the substance of his flesh and nerves would pass, leaving only the impersonal, imperishable bones to be gathered into consecrated soil.

Penelope sighed. ‘Yes—you shall see this letter—but not to-day.’

Then Betty realised that she was not going to have to tell anything about her meeting with Maurice, because Penelope had not noticed her absence.

‘I’ll try to see him again and get things straighter before I talk to Pen about it,’ she thought.

CHAPTER XI

THE GROUNDSWELL

MAURICE DID NOT SPEAK AS HE WALKED BACK WITH his brother. He felt physically exhausted, and mentally battered and storm-tossed. Arthur made no comment of any kind, but took hold of his arm, as though on a sudden impulse of brotherly affection.

Maurice was in that state of mental soreness in which it hurts to know anyone is aware of one's existence; and this careful combination of observation and tact was almost more than his nerves could stand. He did not resist, he did not protest; but 'That settles it,' he thought, 'I shall go away.'

For the moment this decision soothed him.

'I shall go away, I shall go away.'

It was only a form of words, for he had no notion of where or how he meant to go; but it gave him a sense of possible mastery over his fate, and enabled him to endure the fact that his younger brother, while helping him home, was careful not to seem to notice that his help was needed. (Of course, if Arthur had not helped him he would not have liked that either, and if he had made any remark, that would have been a real annoyance. The fact was that in the state of mind Maurice was in nothing that anyone could say or do to him could possibly appear right.)

When they got back it was nearly lunch-time; and he was faced with the choice of either saying that he did not want any lunch, or of sitting down to it, feeling as ill as he did, and enduring unspoken comments on the poorness of his appetite.

Each of these courses had its own drawbacks, but he contrived to find a third which combined the disadvantages of both and shared the advantages of neither.

He came to lunch and sat sullen and weary, playing disgustedly with his food, so that his mother and brother lost all wish to eat theirs, and strained themselves to appear unconcerned and keep up an ordinary exchange of conversation. Then presently he got up from the table with some muttered excuse, and strayed out into the garden.

'I can't bear it,' he told himself. 'I shall go away.'

Arthur and Mrs. Forbes looked at one another bleakly across the table. Mutely they interrogated each other's faces. Arthur shook his head.

'Better not, I think,' he answered the unspoken question, 'He hates to be watched or followed.'

He reflected that before long he himself would have to go back to Cambridge, or give some reason for not going. What on earth was going to happen? He felt the weight and the puzzle of life. Perfunctorily he and his mother continued their meal. They ate, each for the sake of the other, neither wishing to confess to having lost all inclination, but they did not trouble any longer to sustain a natural flow of cheerful conversation.

Maurice did not go far. In fact, he sat down upon the first seat he came to. 'I shall go away,' he said once more, this time aloud and in a perfectly matter-of-fact tone, as though that settled it and the thing was as good as done. It was as though by saying the words to himself he was able to enjoy the benefits of the action.

'I shall go away.'

But it was not for long that he found the statement comforting, for it did not convince him even while he said it.

Go away; while he felt so horribly seedy, while the least exertion made him dizzy, while the least annoyance brought helpless, angry tears to his eyes! It was to cease to exist that he needed, or rather never to have been, so that he might leave no trace or memory behind.

Go—he could only go to friends, and that would be as bad as this, or worse, if worse were possible. They would watch—they would notice—they would talk and think and compare notes, and then they would write home reports of his progress.

No use in going a little way on the end of a string. He must escape to somewhere where he was not known, where people would not look at him, or wonder about him, and where he could leave the whole of his past behind.

Likely!

He pictured to himself how Arthur and his mother would listen politely while he announced his intention—how they would stand tactfully aside and not interfere, paying him that last, completest

insult of seeming to agree with every preposterous thing he might say, as though he were not a creature that could be talked to or reasoned with.

Letting him go.

Most certainly they would let him go. They would even try to allow him to think that they had lost track, and that he had gone beyond their sight and hearing, if once they realised that it was that he needed.

It was a hole he wanted, a dark hole in the ground, where he could lie down unseen and forgotten. He had come home only as an animal returns to its burrow to hide itself. But he had found his burrow full of eyes and whispers.

‘I shall go away.’

He had nowhere to go. He would never succeed in escaping. They would watch, they would follow; they would let him go, but only as the cat lets the mouse—never too far.

They would do more than that, they would even arrange his escape for him—stage it, so that he might not find it too fatiguing, and contrive that it should lead him to some safe, suitable, comfortable spot, from which news of him should be sent regularly without his knowledge.

Away—there was no such thing, there was no such possibility. It seemed to his imagination that only one place on earth was safe from the tact and watchfulness of his friends and the curiosity of human kind. Like dawn it came back, like a cruel dawn that grew slowly and inevitably to an intolerable daylight.

He should have stayed there—died and been damned, and no one would have known. Now death itself would be no way out of the net of their surmisings and their watchful, anxious love.

Once the vision of the jungle had visited him it was useless to attempt to break the chain of his memories. He should have stayed there in hell instead of bringing hell home with him to England.

He sat a long while, forgetful of himself and of his surroundings, while his consciousness quickened into a waking nightmare.

No escape—his brain and his lungs were not more himself than the tangled, fantastic forest, draped like a curtain down hills as steep as cliffs, spread like a cloud over black swamps. He was caught among crawling, living roots, choked by strange scents of flowers or of decay; his pulses beat with the secret life of insects and of reptiles. There was no escape. No escape from this, because it was more than a memory. It was part of his mind. It was himself.

He sat a long time inert and giving no sign.

Lizzy found him and curled up at his feet. Arthur approached cautiously, and decided that it was better not to disturb him—had the doctor not declared that rest was what he needed? And did he not seem to be resting as he sat and stared at the untidy autumnal flower beds, where withered leaves were caught among the tall, pale, straggling Michaelmas daisies?

‘He won’t be too cold,’ thought Arthur, ‘not as long as the sun keeps out and shines on the seat.’

Later it would be necessary either to make him come in, or to bring out a rug or a coat.

That made it impossible for Arthur to attempt to communicate with Betty. To tell the truth, he was not altogether sorry for that. His relations with Betty were not as easy as they had been before her strange, disquieting outburst over Lizzy.

He was very curious to know what had passed between her and Maurice before he joined them; but he was conscious of having nothing pleasant to tell in return. He was in no hurry to describe how Maurice had been behaving since.

Now that he was becoming consciously aware of Betty’s feelings in the matter, their days of whole-hearted and inconsiderate frankness were at an end.

Penelope stayed in her room all the afternoon. She seemed to find Clifford’s letter sufficient occupation and company. Betty came up about tea-time, bringing her a tray.

‘Bring yourself a cup, too,’ said Penelope, ‘and have tea with me.’

‘Tell me, dear,’ she began again when Betty came back with a second cup, ‘I did not really listen when you read. This man who writes—who sends Clifford’s letter—how did he say he came by it?’

‘He says he found it with the body,’ Betty reminded her.

'With the body?' Penelope repeated with a puzzled frown. Betty looked at the letter to make sure.

'No—not with—*near* is the word.'

'*Near* the body. But that is all the same—with or near. He found it. It was left with no one. Given to no one. See, child, I do not understand one thing. Why was the letter there? Why was it left behind? Why did Maurice not bring it with him? Why——?'

Her face changed as she spoke from a look of puzzled inquiry to something very much like alarm.

'But—but I do not understand,' she concluded.

Betty shook her head blankly. She wanted to see Maurice again before she repeated to Penelope what he had told her. Understand—no—she did not understand. With a sinking heart she realised that the sense of trouble and dissatisfaction that oppressed her was finding its way along a totally different avenue into Penelope's mind.

'That's all he says about it,' she stated, turning over the letter doubtfully.

'I was asleep when he died.' Maurice had said, but he could not have been asleep all the time while that long letter was being written. He must have been aware of its existence——

'No—not necessarily,' so she corrected herself to herself. 'It must certainly have been begun—most of it must have been written before Uncle Clifford was taken seriously ill. He may have added a sentence or two afterwards—perhaps while Maurice

was asleep—but the greater part he must have done beforehand. He probably carried it in his pocket; he had not told Maurice of its existence and he had not chanced to find it.' That surely was clear and simple. It was not obvious, but one could think of circumstances that would make it possible.

'Maurice can't have known he had written anything,' she declared.

'I suppose not,' Penelope assented. 'But it is strange.' Then she added, as though she had spoken too strongly, 'Yes, I do think it rather strange.'

She was silent. Betty waited a few seconds, then stole a nervous glance, realising that because she did not understand Penelope she was a little afraid of her.

But as she watched, she saw the trouble smoothing itself out of her face. She had forgotten Layland, she had forgotten Maurice; her mind was filled with what Clifford was saying, she had ceased to wonder why his message reached her as it did. Her lips formed the words soundlessly as she read. It was as though she heard him speaking to her again; for he was one of those who write very much as they speak.

'Respite——' thought Betty, 'but that's all.'

She was glad Penelope did not know that she had spoken to Maurice. Respite—but she must use her time to the best advantage; so she told herself, as she carried the tray downstairs. She must see Arthur. She must see Maurice—she must get things

a little clearer before Penelope began to wonder too much.

The sun's rays still slanted down through the thin leaves to the seat where Maurice was sitting, but a haze had gathered in the air, so that their power had gone, and a damp chill was stealing up from the meadows.

Arthur hovered about undecided, unwilling to seem to make a fuss, not sure whether the moment had arrived when it was necessary to interfere. Should he wait a little longer? No definitely, the air was damp, and Maurice must not risk taking another chill. Yet if one interfered too much, to the point of getting oneself disliked, one destroyed one's usefulness.

It was all wrong. He began to see that he had mismanaged the whole business. Of course he ought to have acted sooner. Quite half an hour ago—before he began to feel any change in the air—he ought to have strayed out and sat down on the seat beside Maurice. Then he could have got up and remarked quite casually, 'I say, it's getting chilly; I'm going in; what about you? Would you like your coat, or are you coming in too?'

Something like that would have sounded natural and spontaneous, not like interfering or looking after an invalid. Arthur's relations with his kind had hitherto been straightforward, his intimacies simple and healthy, or he would have known that the conscious effort to appear natural and spontaneous marks the last stages of disastrous failure in dealing

with one's friends. Something must be done, however; every minute the air grew damper and more chilly.

He sauntered abstractedly down the garden path, seeming to happen to look every way in turn except towards the seat where his brother was sitting.

'Hullo, there you are,' he remarked with slightly exaggerated surprise.

Maurice looked round at his voice and spoke suddenly without reflexion or intention. 'I can't bear it. I'm going away.' The words were involuntary and unchosen. He did not even mean them in any literal sense. He spoke as he might have screamed. Arthur stood aghast, less at his words than at the blank, empty, hopeless look of his face.

'Well—come along in now,' he suggested reasonably, 'it's getting chilly, and it's nearly tea-time. We can talk about the other presently. I daresay it would be a good plan.'

'I didn't mean it,' snapped Maurice irritably. 'There's no point in humouring me as if I was a child or an idiot.'

'Well, but I *do* think it might be a good plan,' replied Arthur, reddening a little as he spoke. He did think so. Of course it would need to be carefully arranged, but he did think that Maurice and his mother were getting on each other's nerves, and that the atmosphere of the household was becoming dangerously strained.

'Can't you call me a fool and have done with it?' Maurice retorted disagreeably.

Arthur wished from the bottom of his heart that it was possible to have done with it half as easily as all that.

Maurice's exclamation, 'I can't bear it, I'm going away,' might just as well have been, 'Damn everything,' for all the information it really gave him about his state of mind. Indeed, 'Damn everything' would have expressed his feelings, not perhaps more forcibly, but considerably more correctly.

However, 'I can't bear it, I'm going away,' was, as it happened, what he actually said; and Arthur heard it, and thought about it and attached far more significance to it than he would have done to the other and more accurate phrase; for it is eternally and painfully true that by one's words one is judged, and more especially by every idle word.

He realised that his mother and, to a less degree, himself, were irritating Maurice in a fashion that strangers probably would not. Betty, too, for that matter, though he could not be certain whether to have seen her was really worse than to know she was about, waiting within a few miles and keeping out of the way.

'I can't bear it, I'm going away,' had suggested to him a line of thought which 'Damn everything' would not have done. Would it perhaps be better for Maurice to go right away for a few days or a few weeks until he felt better and more able to face the world? It would be perfectly easy to arrange for him to board at one of the beautiful isolated old farm houses that were hidden here and there in the hollows of the Downs. The plan seemed to have

a great deal to recommend it; but yet Arthur felt that Maurice ought, before he went, to give a little more information about Clifford's death and so on. It was possible that he had already done so to Betty this morning. In that case one did not want to make him repeat anything he might have said upon that painful topic. One could arrange nothing, of course, without talking things over with her.

All the afternoon he had been glad of an excuse for not attempting to meet her; but now he felt he had some real new light, and a problem on which he would be glad to hear her opinion. He did not quite know how to set about it. The simplest thing becomes difficult once you think about it too long and try to give it too natural an air. He was suffering from that exaggerated sensitiveness that a strained situation in the family is apt to breed. Maurice, he knew, hated to feel himself a subject of conversation; and he believed that if he walked or drove down the lane in the direction of the village Maurice would suspect that he was going to talk to Betty about this morning's encounter, and would brood and fret himself into a still more intractable state of irritation. He knew that to give a false excuse would only make matters worse, and so began ingeniously to plan to go at a time at which he would not be missed.

Finally—it was really astonishing how underhand and roundabout the methods of this fundamentally openhearted youth were now becoming—he sent a scribbled note by the hand of the gardener.

'There is something I must talk to you about; I'll either come to-night after Mother and Maurice have gone to bed (they both go early, but of course I can't fix an exact time), or to-morrow at 7.30 a.m.

'Send me back word which you would prefer, and according to what you say, either stay up to-night or get up early to-morrow. It might be possible to get off at a more ordinary time without being missed, but I want to make quite certain.'

The gardener arrived with the note quite soon after Betty had come down from Penelope's room. She was glad to get it, for she had been wondering how she could convey to Arthur the fact of the arrival of Clifford's letter. It seemed absurd to write and post a letter which would not be delivered till mid-day to-morrow, but that was what she was planning to do, for she and Arthur had not arranged to meet the following day, and less than ever after her scene with Maurice did she feel she could drive or walk up to the Forbes' front door and demand to see him.

'Come this evening,' she wrote, 'I shall be very glad indeed to see you.' Then after a moment's hesitation she tore up that note and wrote another, 'Very well, to-morrow morning. I will be up and ready without fail.'

She made the change because she realised that before she saw Arthur she must be certain how much she meant to tell him, and whether she intended to share her own vague secret misgivings.

It was not that she felt, as Arthur was beginning to do, any need to deal sparingly with the resources of a

possibly weakening ally, it was not that she did not trust him absolutely, as she had always done; but she did want to know what she really thought herself before putting ideas into his head. She must clear her own mind. She must think about all this before she began to talk of it.

CHAPTER XII

THE NIGHT BEFORE

NO SOONER WAS THE GARDENER OUT OF REACH than Betty found herself regretting her answer. With Penelope upstairs and the house to herself she felt she would have all the time she needed for thinking long before Arthur could possibly see his family to bed and drive over.

However, she soon found that the matter was not as simple as all that, for she was quite unable to think at all. She tried in vain to get her mind to work reasonably and dispassionately, to view her problems sensibly from the outside, weighing the exact significance of this or that; but all she could do was to re-enact her scene with Maurice and re-experience a whole tangle of powerful, ill-defined emotions.

Sometimes she felt a strong surge of love, of pity and of longing, sometimes a creeping, paralysing, inexplicable dread, and sometimes sheer exasperation at her own helplessness in the face of Maurice's lack of response.

Physical sensations were repeated as well. She was hot one minute, cold the next, now dazed and numb, now prickling, now fretted to a nervous restlessness which she could not control, so that she was forced to rise and move about the room. All the while

she was aware of vague, shifting sensations of bodily discomfort, a running accompaniment to her feverish turmoil. It was in vain that she tried to still and order her thoughts; she found it as impossible to consider things coolly and reasonably in retrospect as she had done at the time. The moment she began to recall Maurice's words and behaviour she found herself repeating the vehement emphatic phrases that she herself had used with so little effect.

'It isn't what you've done or not done that I care about. All that's nothing to me. You and me——' and so on. She tried to remind herself that she had now a different and more complicated problem to deal with, that she must give this letter of Penelope's its due place in her interpretation of the matter; all she could do was to repeat again and again her scene with Maurice, and that rather with increasing than diminishing emotion. No doubt, unconsciously, all the while she was working towards some kind of decision, some kind of definite point of view. No doubt, every time she rehearsed the scene she involuntarily altered it a little, and in time would have found herself able to pass judgment upon it; but she herself was quite unaware of any such tendency.

Instead of considering the significance of this or of that, which was what she had sat down with every intention of doing, she continued passionately to assure herself and Maurice that love was all and everything; that nothing else on earth need matter to them at all; that nothing else was true or signifi-

cant or lasting or real; and that therefore everything must be well if only they would trust their love. She kept thinking of things she wished she had said to Maurice—better, more forcible, more compelling ways of phrasing her convictions.

Again and again she pictured herself assuring him that all must be well if only he would believe it so. She re-asserted this so warmly that for a while she believed it herself; but then again as she went back she felt a check—a definite barrier—something in his mind that withstood the attack of her love.

Yet she could overcome that, she felt sure of it, if only she had a free field—if only it were not for other, outside people and things.

Arthur—Penelope—Mrs. Forbes—Uncle Clifford, too, for that matter, though he was dead. She felt resentful of their existence, their interference, their claims. Her love was not being given a fair chance. She wanted the whole world clear and empty for herself and Maurice.

Seeing that nothing else really mattered, it was hateful and ridiculous that other things should have to be considered at such a time.

‘If only I could have him to myself,’ she thought. ‘If only I didn’t have to keep considering all these other people!’ Here was Penelope beginning to wonder what had really happened, beginning to be puzzled and dissatisfied. How long would she be content simply passively to wonder?

‘Not very long—one would have to tell her something or she would begin to make trouble.

But it was hard to be forced to consider Penelope while she felt the need of concentrating her whole effort upon re-establishing her relations with Maurice.

‘But the thing I must do, the one first thing I must do is to get hold of him, to make him see that nothing can matter if we really love each other—not to ask him questions and try to find out about a lot of things I’m not in the least interested in really.’

Yet Betty was not an unreasonable creature. Parallel with all this extravagant, feverish nonsense there ran a humbling and irritating sense of her own ridiculousness. So she passed the hours between tea and dinner.

She had expected that Penelope would stay in her room all the evening, but she came down and sat at table, a little remote, a little dreamy, eating what was set before her with an abstracted, far-off look.

After dinner, ‘Come down into the garden,’ she suggested.

It was a still, cool evening. The dampness in the air made the darkness seem to come quite close, and touch their faces and creep in between them and their clothes. Penelope held Betty’s arm as they walked across the dim, grey, frosted lawn to the low boundary wall that separated their garden from the meadow beyond.

The world had a pale, fantastic look, as though any bright light might dissolve it, or any sudden noise might shatter it. There was no moon, the stars

were large, low and mysterious, being both dimmed and magnified by the vapour in the air.

'Let us go through into the field,' Penelope suggested.

Betty reflected, almost automatically, that they would spoil their shoes and get their feet wet. She all but answered, 'Isn't it very damp?' But reason checked that conventional response. The moment her individual mind touched the question, she knew that they were both too healthy to be injured by wet feet, and that their shoes and stockings were of less account in the world and in their own lives than Penelope's moods.

They opened the little gate and went out.

'Frost,' Penelope murmured, 'frost.'

'The ground is still soft,' said Betty, 'it is only hoar frost on the grass.'

After that Penelope did not speak at all; Betty realised that she needed her presence for the sense it gave her of human companionship, but had no wish to talk or be talked to. It was nice of her, she thought, to want her, 'Dear Penelope, dear, dear, Penelope.'

Love for Penelope was just a warm, unreasoning tenderness. She felt it now rising in her heart like a bubbling spring, for no reason but that Penelope was with her and seemed to want her company, and really was rather a love.

'Dear Penelope,' she murmured.

Penelope squeezed her arm. They walked across the field to the gate and wandered on down the lane.

When they did come in their feet were wet and chilled, and their shoes and stockings drenched with mud.

‘It doesn’t seem worth changing,’ said Penelope, ‘I shall go to bed now. And you, dear, you must not sit in your wet things. You must either change or go to bed.’

‘I think I’ll change,’ said Betty, ‘I don’t feel like going to bed yet.’

She poked up the drawing-room fire and sat beside it, warming her feet. ‘After all,’ she thought, ‘what does it all amount to? Surely I’m making a fuss. Surely I’m getting scared about nothing. What, after all, is there now that there hasn’t been all along?’

All that was disquieting in Maurice’s behaviour had been implied by Arthur’s first account of him. There was nothing new except what should have been reassuring, because it made his mood and conduct more intelligible. That was his statement, that Clifford had died while he himself was asleep.

But yet did not the evidence of this letter found ‘near the body’—did not that require some explanation? She wished, suddenly, that it was impossible to avoid speaking of the letter to Arthur until she had had a chance of asking Maurice about it. It wasn’t, of course. He would hear of it from Penelope if not from her. For her to avoid mentioning it would seem to imply—something she would not think about.

She wondered what it was Arthur wanted to see

her about. She wished she had asked him to come to-night, for, all of a sudden, she began to be anxious about what he might have to tell her.

Perhaps Maurice had said something—something new—to him. Perhaps Maurice was not so well. But if it was that he would have said so in his letter.

Was it perhaps—the thought was forming in the back of her mind where she would not look at it—was it perhaps something he did not care to commit to paper?

This unadmitted surmise helped to strengthen the vague uneasiness which was growing up in her mind out of her own impressions, out of what Maurice had said and implied, and the wording of Mr. Layland's letter.

She was uncomfortably aware of the existence of some missing factor which would combine and make sense of all these hints and fragments. Had Maurice perhaps supplied that missing piece to Arthur after parting from her this morning?

And the meaning—the sense that it would make now——? She could give no name to her fear, but she did find herself shrinking from enlightenment.

She heard the servants go to bed, and the house creak and grow quiet again. Presently, as happens in the country, the night began to creep into the room. In spite of the fire which she kept together in the grate, it grew more and more chilly. In spite of the lamp on the table, she became increasingly conscious of the presence of darkness all round.

‘Nothing for it but bed,’ she told herself, lighted her candle and went upstairs. She had sat too long over a sinking fire, Her feet were cold, the hot bottle in her bed was only warm.

Cold feet and an endless chain of worrying thoughts and distressing memories. Nothing could offer a worse chance of sleep than that.

She seemed to herself to be thinking lucidly and in a large, bold fashion, and yet again and again she found herself back in the same place, repeating the same never-finished assurances that nothing mattered but love, that Maurice could tell her anything or tell her nothing, it would make no difference, it would be all the same.

But yet the repetition of these reassuring sentiments, which should surely have soothed and comforted her, so worked upon her mind that she found herself weeping into the pillow. ‘Oh, Maurice, Maurice, I do love you. Maurice—*please* love me, Maurice,’ and so on, all very silly and incoherent, and not in the least to the point.

She had no notion how long she spent in this uncomfortable and unprofitable fashion. It felt like more hours than were left in the night when she came upstairs, but probably it was not very long. Certainly there was not the faintest sign of dawn when she heard a light tap at her door.

All the wildest fancies imaginable sprung into being in her mind. It was Arthur coming to tell her that Maurice was dead, it was Maurice come to ask her to run away with him because he had mur-

dered his uncle, it was Uncle Clifford who was not really dead at all, and who had come to her door so that she might break to Penelope the good news of his safety and return. It was any or all of these things——'

'Who's that?' she asked, and Penelope's voice answered, 'may I come in?'

'Oh, it's you, Pen! Yes, come in. Do come in. What is it?'

Penelope came in. Only her face and hands were dimly visible in the dark. In any one else it would have seemed the very limit of affectation to wear a black silk hemstitched nightgown, black slippers lined with black fur, a black dressing-gown, and two black ribbon bows, tying her plaited hair. In Penelope such thoroughness and consistency appeared only natural and inevitable.

'What is it, Pen, darling!'

'Nothing, dear, only I could not sleep, and so I thought, if you were awake, I would come and talk to you.'

'Oh, Pen—you're a love. Here come into bed, you'll catch cold if you don't.'

Penelope pushed off her slippers and crept into bed beside Betty. 'I have brought you Clifford's letter,' she whispered, 'for you to read. I thought you would like to see it.'

She spoke like a child who offers to share her dearest treasure with another child. One had that queer feeling about Penelope sometimes as though some part of her were not quite grown up.

‘Oh, Pen——’ Betty hesitated.

‘Yes, yes, I wish it,’ she insisted. ‘Where is your candle? Can I fetch it for you?’

‘No—it’s here by my bed.’

Betty struck a match.

‘But, Pen—are you—are you sure you want me to?’

‘Yes, yes,’ Pen nodded eagerly. ‘See—here it is.’

Betty took it and read it slowly and carefully; for it interested her intensely, it might have a direct bearing on all her problems, and she thought it unlikely that she would ever have a chance of seeing it again.

She was glad that the poor flickering light of the candle must have made it seem natural to hesitate and to look back. She knew that presently she would be drawing inferences from the very words that she was reading now; and so she read to remember.

All the more carefully she read because she saw that the letter was not in the least what she had anticipated. She had expected something like a diary kept from day to day and carried on because there was no means of posting it. Uncle Clifford had often written such letters while he was out of reach of civilisation, noting down things that would interest Penelope while they were fresh in his mind. She had supposed that in this case there would be at the end a few words or a few sentences of farewell, or of anticipation of death; but this was completely different from anything she had foreseen.

There were no references to the circumstances of the writer; the letter was friendly, straightforward and practical; it made no mention of danger or of ill-health, but yet from first to last it was the letter of a man who expected to die. There was no word of any such expectation, but that could be the only reason for writing as he did, on one subject after another. He gave advice or expressed wishes, in careful unambiguous language, about things which he would have seen to himself had he come home. That he would not come home, that he would never come home, was the necessary background of his thought throughout.

Only when she came to the end of the last page was there any reference to his actual circumstances, and that was vague and indirect.

‘Of course none of this is really important, and I suppose the chances are very much against my letter ever reaching you. All the same I can’t believe that communication with you is completely cut off. Writing this I feel——’

There the sheet ended.

‘Is that all?’ Betty asked.

Penelope shook her head.

‘There is one more page, but he only tells me that he loves me and so on. It is interesting to me, but that is all.’

‘Doesn’t he say where he is writing, or what’s going on, or what is the matter, or why he doesn’t think he will be able to come back?’

‘No—no. He says he has seen a flower that is very beautiful and that he had never seen before. It has a

sweet scent but too strong when you come near it——’

‘No—I suppose he thought Maurice would tell all that, and why should he waste his time on what Maurice could tell us as well?’

‘But then it is strange he did not give Maurice this letter.’

There was a moment’s silence.

Betty tried desperately to fit all this into a pattern with what Maurice had told her. The puzzle had too many pieces or else too few. She could not see what to say.

‘But, Betty,’ Penelope went on, ‘I do not understand. *Why* did Maurice not bring the letter?’

‘Well, Maurice looks——’ Betty began, then hastily corrected herself. ‘It looks, from what Arthur says, as if Maurice had been ill himself. I think that must have something to do with it. Perhaps—well I don’t know what can have happened.’

She was afraid to go on for fear she might let slip something that would let Penelope guess she had seen Maurice that morning. Besides, she didn’t know what she thought herself. Simply anything might have happened. It might have been that Maurice was ill first and seemed likely to die, so that it never occurred to Uncle Clifford to ask him to take a letter. But no, no—for in that case he would have mentioned the fact. The complete absence of any reference to Maurice was inexplicable. Inexplicable—vaguely alarming, as were some of the things Maurice had said to her this morning.

'I think it is time Arthur should speak to Maurice,' Penelope hazarded tentatively. 'It is a long time since he came back.'

'It is a long time,' Betty agreed.

'It is strange,' Penelope took up the very point that was tormenting Betty, 'that Clifford does not say one single word about him.'

'It does seem strange,' Betty echoed, reluctant to offer any fresh suggestion, for fear of where a new train of thought might lead.

'Do you think perhaps——?' Penelope went on doubtfully—'I think it almost must be that they were not together when Clifford wrote this. That perhaps Maurice had changed his mind at the last minute, perhaps, and gone some other way?'

'Oh—I don't know——'

Indeed, judging from Uncle Clifford's letter, that did seem a reasonable solution, or part of a reasonable solution; but Betty remembered what Maurice had said.

'You must ask Arthur—say it is time for him to ask Maurice—I think——' Penelope began; then suddenly a new idea occurred to her. 'But he has been ill, you say—do you think perhaps he has forgotten?'

'Forgotten?' Betty murmured.

'Forgotten—yes. Lost his memory. It sometimes happens like that, that people forget a few years or weeks or months or days—and perhaps—— Oh I think—yes, Betty I think it *is* so—and his mind is all in a muddle and so he cannot bear to think or talk of it.'

'He died of a fever,' Maurice's words echoed in Betty's brain, 'I blamed myself, but I couldn't have saved him. There was really nothing I could have done. He'd almost certainly have been dead by now whatever I'd done.'

'It was like this—he died while I was asleep. Of course I ought to have managed to keep awake——'

'I don't know, Pen. I don't know what to make of it,' she confessed, and resolved that in the morning she must share the whole of her problem with Arthur.

'I think I will go to sleep now if I go back to bed,' said Penelope.

'Good night, Pen. Thank you ever so much for letting me read that letter.'

'I show you because you loved him, too, and because you see how it is like him.'

'Like him! Oh yes—it simply *is* him,' Betty agreed.

'Like as if I hear him speak,' Penelope murmured.

How long, Betty wondered, would Clifford's letter have the power to make her feel that she was still in communication with her husband. And how long would it have the power to charm out of her mind all the questionings and uneasiness which it helped to call into being? Hearing her husband speak, Penelope had forgotten everything but the sound of his voice and the reality of his love. It seemed a little as though she had even forgotten that he was dead or, at any rate, that his death meant anything very important.

'Good night, Pen darling,' said Betty, and kissed her as she got out of her bed.

It was no wonder Uncle Clifford had loved Pen, she was so warm and soft, so yielding and so responsive.

'Good night, my Betty,' she answered affectionately, 'Good night, my dear Betty, my dear child'

CHAPTER XIII

THE MORNING AFTER

BETTY LAY AWAKE LONG AFTER PENELOPE HAD LEFT her. It was time to think, it was time to give her mind soberly and seriously to her problems; the matter was growing urgent, it was time to think *hard*. But she could only feel.

Round and round and round things turned in her brain. Turned and churned, till she found herself repeating again and again the same meaningless phrase, with a tremendous sense of its importance and significance. So far as she could remember it was something like, 'If I was to have said so it stands he should never have detected.'

She fell asleep at last, but so late that she all but overslept next morning. She jumped out of bed, scrambled into her clothes and ran down to the front door.

The weather had changed in the night; the frost had disappeared and it was a grey, soft morning, not cold, but clammy, oppressive, and moist. A light drizzle drifted in pulsing, rhythmic folds past the dark evergreen shrubs at an angle of sixty degrees or thereabouts.

Not a day for out of doors.

She hurried down the drive and set the gate open, so that Arthur might not be delayed, and

then she went back to the hall to wait for him there.

On second thoughts, indoors seemed even more impossible than the dripping garden. The maids would be laying the fires, doing the rooms and generally making the house uninhabitable for the time being. She changed her shoes for something thicker, and put on a long waterproof coat and a much battered felt hat.

‘I think the toolshed is the most cosy and homelike spot at this hour,’ she told Arthur when he turned up a few minutes later. ‘Do you mind?’

‘Not at all. I like it. And besides it’s my fault for choosing such an unearthly hour. I really feel most awfully apologetic for dragging you out of bed on a day like this. Kind of weather when nature undoubtedly meant us all to hibernate.’

He was talking in order to carry them on until they reached a spot where he could set to and say what he had come to say, and also to conquer the slight feeling of nervousness he was experiencing as he wondered what Betty was going to make of this. But Betty had no feeling that she needed to be anywhere in particular before she began to talk. Not even that she preferred to be out of the rain. She did not answer Arthur’s apology, but said, as she splashed beside him down the path that led through the vegetable garden to the toolshed, ‘Penelope has just had a letter about Uncle Clifford.’

‘Why, who from? What about him?’

‘Oh—from the people that found him—just how he was found and all that. But—this is the queer

thing—enclosing one from him which he wrote before he died and which was found near the body.’

‘What?’

Arthur was so totally unprepared for this that he stood still in the middle of a puddle as he spoke.

‘A letter from Uncle Clifford,’ Betty repeated nervously.

They stood for a second or so looking at one another, forgetting the rain; then Arthur opened his mouth to speak, but Betty cut in hysterically, feeling she knew what was coming and that she could not bear it.

‘Oh don’t say, “Why didn’t Maurice bring it?” That’s what I’ve been asking myself all night, and that’s what Pen would be asking too—is beginning to ask—only that most of the time she’s so pleased to have got it at all that she doesn’t remember to wonder how it came.’

Thus debarred from saying the one thing that it had occurred to him to say, Arthur was silent for a few moments, and then he suggested: ‘Let’s get under cover.’

‘Do you know what was in it?’ he asked when they had reached the toolshed.

Betty sat herself down on a broken chair, Arthur balanced himself rather precariously on a worn and dusty wooden shelf, among flower-pots, spuds and baskets. Betty summarised the contents of her uncle’s letter.

‘But——’ Arthur began.

She interrupted him, for she was in that state of mind in which to hear the obvious stated in so many words is unbearable.

‘I know,’ she answered what she believed he was about to say. ‘It’s what he doesn’t tell us that is most remarkable. There is literally not a word about Maurice from start to finish. You’d think that even if they’d separated for some reason or other, he’d have said so—besides what Maurice said——’

‘What did Maurice say?’

‘Oh, I forgot. You weren’t there. Well, Maurice said what you said he’d said all along—about—you know——’

Arthur nodded.

‘Yes, but then suddenly he changed his mind and said that it *was* his fault, and that Uncle Clifford died while he—Maurice—was asleep.’

‘Well, that seems to make sense all right by itself, but taken with this letter of Uncle Clifford’s—*and* with the fact that the man who found the body found the letter *near* it—well, what do you make of it all?’

They looked at each other helplessly.

‘I don’t know what to make of it,’ Arthur confessed. He was haunted, miserably haunted, by a phrase which he had heard used in praise of Clifford White—that he always had a good word for everyone—that he was always ready to believe the best of everyone—something of that kind.

Always a good word—but here no word at all, so it seemed, for Maurice.

‘But what was it you specially wanted to see me about?’ Betty reminded him.

‘Oh yes,’ he recollected, ‘so I did.’

‘Well, what about?’

The rain was drifting in through a broken pane of cobwebbed window; the toolshed smelt of mould, and the smell of decaying leaves and wet autumnal ditches stole in from outside.

‘Oh this is beastly!’ he thought.

He would have said it aloud a month ago, ‘Oh, Betty, this is beastly!’ But his whole world was filming itself over with tact and caution and self-resstraint. He was growing afraid to move freely, for fear of upsetting somebody or breaking something. Results—effects—endless echoes and repercussions to everything one said or did.

And now that he was about to attempt it there seemed simply no way of conveying to Betty his changed feeling about his brother. How could he describe the strained, tense, watchful atmosphere of his home to anyone who had not felt it?

In a game of cards one might at this stage throw down one’s hand and own oneself defeated; say to one’s adversary, ‘You get all the rest, I can’t stop you.’

And then a new deal.

‘Well, it was Maurice I wanted to talk to you about. He seemed so queer when he came back from talking to you—he didn’t want any lunch——’ (How futile all this sounded, how powerless one was to convey sensations—atmosphere—intuitions.)

‘Then he went off by himself all the afternoon, and it got chilly about tea-time, so I suggested coming in, and all he said was: “I can’t bear it, I’m going

away." Of course I sort of said, "Well, why not? Let's talk about it after tea," then he pretended he hadn't meant anything and turned quite crochety.'

'I wondered,' he went on shyly after a moment's pause, 'whether it wouldn't *really* be better for him, to go away for a bit. Whether we aren't perhaps all getting rather badly on his nerves. It's no good treating him or feeling about him as if he hadn't been—well—wasn't in fact for the matter of that—quite ill.'

He looked at Betty pleadingly, as though he were begging her not to make things needlessly painful by having another fit like the one before.

'Oh, I daresay,' Betty murmured blankly. She just seemed unable to grasp things, she had a queer cold, sinking feeling, she was almost ready to let go and fold her hands and wait for the inevitable oncoming disaster. Then she remembered something else she had to contribute, something else to build into the curious, menacing structure that was rising round them.

'Penelope is beginning to think it's time she heard a little more from Maurice. She thinks you ought to ask him. Like the rest of us, she can't help beginning to think it is queer, what with Uncle Clifford's letter and all. She did suggest perhaps Maurice had lost his memory—or part of it. I haven't told her that I'd talked to Maurice at all, so that she doesn't know what he said about having been asleep. I'm afraid if she heard that she might think things queerer still.

'What I'm trying to say is that I don't believe we

can count on her patience—on her keeping out of it—much longer.'

'No,' Arthur assented gloomily, 'I suppose not.' For a few minutes there was silence between them, and then nervously looking away he asked, 'I say—Betty—*what* do you think?'

She did not answer at once, Arthur heard his heart beginning to beat louder.

'Good heavens,' he thought, 'I ought not to have said that,' But he had said it and there was no retreat.

'I ought not to have said that, I ought not to have said that.' His heart had grown so large and so active that it had invaded the space allotted to his breathing apparatus. Consequently it was growing harder and harder to draw breath. He felt himself beginning to stifle.

'I don't know,' said Betty at last. 'What do you?'

She waited a moment for an answer, but receiving none (however rude it may make you seem you can't chat when your heart is caving in your lungs and thumping all the air out of your body, faster than you can draw it in) she went on, 'I don't think I'm quite ready to think yet, I feel there's something missing. Some large, essential piece of the puzzle. I seem to want to get more evidence together before I try to draw any conclusions.'

Neither would own it, but each read the other's thought very clearly, 'I don't understand, but I don't like the look of it at all. I don't know what to make of it, but something is queer and I don't like it.'

Their reticence was only verbal, they made no attempt to disguise their feelings, and did not doubt that they were correctly interpreted.

'Then'—Betty suggested timidly, 'I think—Penelope—do you think, Arthur, if one of us was to *ask* Maurice——? I think almost better you. You see, I'm all mixed up with something else. Whatever he says has *me* in—me to be reckoned with. A kind of—you know—a sort of—emotional factor. Do you think——?'

'I think certainly better me than you,' Arthur conceded soberly. He did not like the prospect, but if Maurice was going to make a scene it had better be with him than with Betty.

'The doctor——?' Betty threw in inquiringly.

'The doctor's practically lost interest in him. He just says that there's nothing wrong with him now, and how long it takes him to get well rests mainly with himself. All that bracing kind of stuff, you know—fresh air, moderate exercise, good food, plenty of sleep and everything that has made England what it is. And a tonic and an optimistic outlook on life—you know.'

He made no effort to disguise the bitterness of futility and defeat.

'I don't know what to say,' Betty confessed drearily, 'but I do think we can't leave Pen out of our calculations much longer.'

They looked at one another helplessly.

'If only one knew what was best,' Betty reflected sadly. 'Arthur, I've got to leave it to you to a great extent. I've got to trust your judgment. He left me

with such a *queer* feeling, I believe I'm somehow part of what's upsetting him—so—you see—I've got to leave things rather to you about this idea of his going away, and about whether I see him or not, and about what you ask or don't ask him——'

'I'll do my best,' Arthur answered, 'but I wish to goodness you'd got someone better to leave it to.'

'And—whatever you decide'—Betty concluded—'don't forget there's Pen.'

They did not seem to have got anywhere, but yet there seemed no immediate prospect of their getting farther.

'I suppose I ought to be going back,' said Arthur. 'I'll write to you or else come and see you if there is anything to tell you.'

'Or if there isn't!' Betty put in.

'Yes—or if there isn't!' Arthur agreed, for, after all, the fact that there was nothing to tell would in itself be news.

'Betty—I wish I was more use,' he added.

She laughed unhappily at his puzzled, anxious look. 'I'm sure I don't know what I should do without you,' she said.

'I'm no real use.'

'Well, at least you are company, and that's something.'

Betty returned to her room to finish her toilet, which had received the least amount of attention compatible with a normal appearance. Arthur drove back through the rain. Everything was blurred and misty, like the landscape, as he went along. Betty

was right; it was no use trying to think until one knew a little better what it was one had to think about.

As he climbed the last hill on the way home he overtook a farm cart, and was kept waiting a few minutes while it backed and sidled into a gateway to let him pass.

The soft rain by obscuring the distance seemed to bring the banks and hedges on each side of the road nearer and more into evidence. Quite close beside him there was a little gorse bush smothered with a mass of dodder.

'Beastly stuff,' Arthur thought.

Live, growing threads as fine as hairs, rooting all over the living plant, draining it, strangling it, swarming and matting all over it, drinking its life and burying it away from sun and air. He felt himself a little like the unhappy gorse bush, and pitied it. His mind was being drained and matted over by a tangle of apprehensions and considerations. How would this affect Maurice? What would Betty make of that. And what would be the effect of the other upon Penelope? His own thoughts, his own feelings, his own view of the matter, were tangled and disguised and stifled. Every idea that came to him was qualified, even if it was not occasioned, by his opinion of its probable effect upon someone else. He could not get disinterestedly to work upon his problem. If he tried, for a moment, to see what he himself thought, he was hampered by his speculation as to what some other person thought or what he wanted them to think.

Life, it seemed, was a parasitic kind of business, everyone living upon each other's minds and emotions. He himself seriously considering what effect he wished to produce rather than what he honestly thought of the matter.

Honestly? There could be no such thing as honesty in a world where one was surrounded by people whose feelings had to be considered.

CHAPTER XIV

‘ ANIMAL—VEGETABLE ’

WHEN ARTHUR GOT HOME HE PUT AWAY HIS CAR AND then went straight to Maurice's room, as he usually did first thing in the morning, just to see how he seemed, and whether he was meaning to come down to breakfast.

Maurice's nerves had been excited by all yesterday's emotions, and he had been awake a great part of the night, re-enacting sometimes his encounter with Betty, but more often older scenes that were more deeply rooted in his memory.

When he did sleep his dreams were merely a visible projection of the tangled forest that was his mind. He had wandered in it and seen it external to himself, though at the same time he had known that it was rooted in his brain, and that the substance of his soul was passing into it and building it up—just as the substance of Clifford's body was dissolving into its prototype.

It was like a metamorphosis in some strange Eastern tale. He was changing—actually changing—into the forest in which he wandered helpless and lost.

He woke slowly to the cool, aloof dimness of an English autumn morning. A soft, reticent light that touched delicately the straight edges or rounded

surfaces of things, not a hot, close, penetrating gloom threaded by gleams and reflections that wound their way strangely into one's brain.

Some change had come about, some subtle alteration in the state of his mind or body. He lay still, staring at the cool, grey-tinted wall of his bedroom—a flat, blank surface—and the straight, hard, beautiful definite lines of the wardrobe and chair that stood against it.

He found that he was seeing it, not seeing through it. It was no longer a mere painted transparency behind which a whole world twined and branched and rooted and grew. He concentrated his vision upon it, as one may deliberately focus one's sight upon the reflections and ripples on the surface of a pool, not look down below the surface to the weeds and mud and pebbles at the bottom.

Something he was seeing clearer in his own life. What he had said to Arthur fretfully and impulsively was no less than the truth. He must go away. But also he must see Betty; he must see her first and tell her the truth, and then he must disappear. After all, that should not be very difficult. It was all a question of money, and he had plenty. He was free, perfectly free, to live where he chose.

It seemed easy, now that he could see his bedroom and its furniture so distinctly; it seemed easy just to go. How cool his mind was, and how rational! There was no need to consider what he meant to do eventually. He would just take a room in town. He would give Arthur an address, stay there a little while, until he felt stronger and more

capable, and then leave it. He would make some credible and quite ordinary excuse for leaving, not run off in any sensational or guilty fashion so that they would feel moved to set the police on his track.

But Betty—yes, he must see Betty first. He must not let her excite him or hurt him so that he lost his head as he had done yesterday. He must tell her the truth quite simply.

All this in snatches, while the main effort of his will was directed to holding fast to his consciousness of the cool, grey wall, the straight-backed wooden chair and the straight polished wardrobe. Sometimes sight alone was not strong enough to keep him steady, and he was driven to think in words.

‘The polished corner of the wardrobe—polished corners of the temple.’

He felt that salvation for him lay merely in his power to grasp and visualise and hold against all comers, against treachery from within and invasion from without, that simple picture—the grey wall, the wooden chair, the polished corner of the wardrobe.

In that way his soul might be saved, the deadly metamorphosis might be checked and undone; he might win back the freedom of his mind from the possession of the jungle.

Arthur came in quietly. He saw that his brother was not asleep, for his eyes were wide open, and yet he was afraid to speak to him.

‘Hullo, Arthur, that you?’ said Maurice without stirring.

He found with a kind of inward triumph that he was perfectly able to talk without losing hold upon his vision.

‘Yes, I thought I might as well come in to see how you were, and if you wanted anything.’

‘Oh, I’m all right. I’ll get up presently, not yet though.’ It was amazing, it was glorious, to be able to express oneself so lucidly, so intelligently and so normally, and at the same time to hold on to one’s salvation—to the wall, the chair, and the wardrobe.

‘I don’t want breakfast sent up to me,’ he went on, ‘I’ll have something when I come down.’

He thrilled with a sense of his own power. Arthur noticed that he lay quite still, not even moving his eyes, and spoke very quietly as though he were afraid of disturbing something.

Arthur was reminded of himself some years before when he had been rather badly hurt in an accident. There had been times when the pain seemed to have gone to sleep, and one dared not move, one hardly dared to speak aloud, because one did not know what or how much one might not rouse.

The recollection disquieted him, for what could it be that Maurice was afraid of waking? How could any sensible person like Arthur guess that he was afraid of scaring away his vision of a blank wall, a wooden chair, and the polished corner of a wardrobe?

‘All right,’ he said with elaborately assumed indifference, ‘shall I tell them to keep something ready for you?’

‘Yes, do, I won’t be very long, but I had rather a restless night, and don’t seem to want to think about food or getting up yet.’

He gloried in saying more than was absolutely necessary. It gave him a sense of mastery over his soul.

For a moment he half considered the possibility of telling Arthur here and now his new decision, he felt so lucid, so calm, so strong. But no—that could wait. He did not want to start any discussion—not any controversy in this holy place.

Arthur, for his part, had come with the intention of talking things over with Maurice, of suggesting that it might be better to go away for a while, and of pointing out, if he seemed able to stand it, that in that case he ought first to say something that could be repeated to Penelope. But he found himself scared and impressed by his brother’s rapt immobility. He was nervously aware that something was going on which he did not understand, and he reflected that later would do just as well for what he had to say.

‘It must be done though,’ he thought as he left the room, ‘and it must be done to-day.’

If only it could be possible to deal with one person at a time—simply consider what seemed to be best for Maurice himself, leaving mother and Betty and Penelope out of account for the time being! It was the interaction of personalities that made life so difficult. That and the fact that they all went on doing something—functioning somehow—even when one was not thinking about them, so that one

could never count on taking them up where one had laid them down.

One had not only to consider, for instance, Maurice himself, but also Maurice's effect upon Penelope and Penelope's subsequent effect upon Maurice, both directly and through her effect upon Betty, so that the world seemed full of the everlasting and incalculable clash and repercussion of one personality against another, and, while little could be foreseen nothing could safely be ignored.

Maurice did not stir. He heard the door creak, as Arthur pulled it to, and he knew himself alone. A little longer he would lie still and hold his vision, feeling that for him salvation lay in the power to see the actual world aloof and solid, not as a poor transparency failing to hide that other world that was the reflection of his own soul.

He intended simply to lie still a little longer and then get up. He believed that before long he would be able to look away and then look back, that something was about to be won that would not be lost, and that if he could hold the vision a few minutes more it would in a sense remain with him; but he could not bear just yet to take his eyes off the visible sign of his deliverance, the wooden chair, the grey wall and the polished corner of the wardrobe.

What actually happened was that insensibly his mind relaxed and he fell asleep again. This time he slept soundly. The restless night had left him very tired, and the morning's vision had stilled his nerves like an opiate.

Presently Lizzy insinuated herself, whining and wriggling round the half-closed door, into her master's room. Her meaning was obvious; she was very sorry to disturb him, but it really was time to get up.

He half roused at her whimpering. 'Lie down Lizzy, lie down,' he murmured fretfully, and fell asleep again.

Lizzy obeyed. She yawned sadly in protest, and curled herself round on the rug by his bedside.

Arthur came up about half-past ten to see what was the matter, then crept away quietly.

'Well, he's just dropped asleep again,' he told his mother.

'The best thing he can do,' she sighed.

Arthur agreed with her outwardly, but inwardly he was curiously disquieted by the fact that Maurice was still in precisely the position in which he had left him last. That, he remembered, was what sometimes used to happen to himself—one lay so carefully, so motionless, that one fell asleep—if one stirred in one's sleep one woke, but one learnt not to, and sometimes slept for hours and woke in exactly the same position. Yet there was no reason that he could imagine why it should hurt Maurice to move.

Maurice woke again with the sense of relief and well-being that a happy dream sometimes leaves behind, even though one may have forgotten it in waking. He looked at his watch, and saw with surprise that he had not much more than time to dress before lunch.

Lizzy stretched herself as he sat up, and gave that peculiar exaggerated yawn prolonged into a whine that signifies, ‘This has gone on long enough. I *am* bored. For pity’s sake let’s do something else.’

‘All right Lizzy,’ he said, ‘I’m just coming.’

He felt a curious detachment from all he did, and at the same time he had a new feeling of grip and mastery.

His sponge, his clothes, his brushes, his razor, he saw and felt them all as he handled them. He was extraordinarily aware of himself, washing, dressing, shaving and of his own sensations as he did so. With conscious and aloof excitement he watched himself give his mind to each process in turn.

Since he came home until now he had gone through life in a kind of dream, his mind reflecting very different things from those about him; but to-day the world had become visible and sensible to him once more, and the present was his own again.

He was consciously aware of the texture and surface of things he touched and of the shape and colour of everything he saw. He had an indescribable and thrilling sense of reverence and pity for material objects—the brass bed-knobs, the glass in which he cleaned his teeth, the reddening creeper that tapped at his window—they were so amazingly concrete, so definite, so bounded, each within itself, so small and so bravely assertive, each of its own individual reality.

It was extraordinary how little he could remember

of any physical sensation during the last few weeks. A hot, dense cloud lay behind him. An ache and oppression of the mind that seemed interminable—impossible of termination—with passages of stress and inexplicable, intolerable irritation. Now he felt outward things each in its own vivid and separate fashion. The world was built up like a tune or like a poem, where every note or every word falls, individual and yet dependent, into its own inevitable fore-ordained place.

The slipperiness and scent of soap, the touch as well as the warmth or cold of water, the change of atmosphere from one room to another, the peculiar resistant quality of Lizzy's rough coat. . . .

And somehow connected with this was his mastery of his own mind, and his steady, unemotional certainty that he must go away.

He came down to lunch, noted and approved the manner in which he greeted his mother and brother, watched himself taking his place at table, listened to himself bearing his part in the conversation—it was only about animals and the weather, but still it was quite naturally done—all with a sense of detachment and power as though he were working himself with strings from above, and could make himself do this or that as he chose.

And for the first time for months he noted what he was eating for lunch, and found it good, and ate some more. What was still more remarkable was that he felt no annoyance at his certainty that Arthur and his mother felt a satisfaction they were

most careful to conceal at all this evidence of improvement in his spirits and his appetite.

And all the while, with an intense excitement and breathless exhilarating sense of victorious adventure he saw and watched himself, doing, and noting, and feeling no irritation at all these things.

CHAPTER XV

SOME FACTS

BETTY AVOIDED CONVERSATION WITH PENELOPE. They were both at breakfast, but Betty hurried her meal, saying that she thought it was going to rain and she must get some flowers for the house.

'It is raining already,' Penelope remarked without any particular air of interest in the weather.

'Oh I think not,' Betty fretted.

In the country in autumn 'raining' is a relative term. Betty did not mean that drops of water were not falling from the clouds, but that she would still be able to find some flowers that were not spoilt.

Once outside she found excuses for staying there, for the rain did not increase though it did not altogether stop. She cut a sheaf of flowers—how they did hold on to life, these pinched and tired chrysanthemums, some white, some yellow, some pinky mauve. They weren't really pretty—late starving blooms. It was a convention to pretend that they were, to smother them up with heavy foliage—evergreen or autumn-tinted—so as to hide the fact that their own leaves were shrivelled and blackened by frost, and to set them in large, bold masses about the house, as though one really thought them a

decoration. She wandered about, cutting one here, one there, so as not to leave any part of the garden utterly bare, and as an excuse for staying out and avoiding Penelope.

She brought them in as usual, but this time, for once, she left Agnes to arrange them alone, and went out again. She did not want to go far from the house for fear Arthur should want to communicate with her, and so she put on her gardening gloves and set to work upon the never-ending and thankless task of weeding, clearing, tying, cutting, and generally dealing with the mess that autumn makes in the garden.

There was a great deal that she might have been doing in the village—people she ought to see and so on—but she did not want to do anything that would take her too far, and so she pottered about, restless, aimless, busying herself with things that undoubtedly needed to be done, but that at the moment did not interest her or occupy her mind in the very least.

About midday she saw the postman coming up the drive, and from sheer idleness of spirits she went to meet him.

‘Yes, Miss, there is one for you to-day.’

She expected to be handed a dressmaker’s bill, a circular from some shop where she dealt, a letter from some friend or relation commenting rather belatedly on the news of Uncle Clifford’s death—indeed there had been letters about him from people they had never heard of; but they were generally written to Penelope.

She took it and glanced at the address quite indifferently. A largish envelope. 'Miss Betty White' in a man's writing, quite unfamiliar. An English stamp—a London postmark.

'I'll take the others too,' she said, 'it'll save you going up the drive.'

She had slipped off her muddy gloves, so as not to soil the letters. She carried them in one hand and the letters in the other, so that it was impossible to open hers until she had laid the others down. As she came into the porch Penelope came out of the morning-room into the hall.

'Why, Betty, where have you been all the morning?' she asked.

What really surprised her was to see Betty now, not the fact that she had not seen her sooner. She supposed she had been trying to meet Maurice, but could not understand why she should have come back so long before lunch-time.

'Oh, I've just been round the garden tidying up.'

'I have been writing letters,' said Penelope. 'To the District Officer, Mr. McKay and Mr. Layland. And others too. Everyone is very kind. So many letters to answer, and a day that is not fit to go out. I have asked this Mr. Layland to send me a photograph of the old church; that will give him pleasure, and he will see that I am not indifferent to his kindness. It will give him a little trouble and he will be glad to take trouble, because you can see by his letter he has a kind heart.'

Betty laughed. She found something very touching in Penelope's artless guile. All the same she felt

nervous of being left alone with her. She was afraid she might start talking more definitely about Uncle Clifford's letter; and she could not well talk about it without her mind being drawn to problems which Betty was anxious she should not consider. Besides, Penelope, in talking of the matter, assumed perfect frankness between them, and a free exchange of knowledge and ideas; so that Betty felt dishonest and uncomfortable in keeping back what was an extremely important contribution to an understanding of the matter.

'More letters there?' Penelope commented as Betty handed them over.

She glanced at the envelopes and named the writers. All people she knew, as it happened.

'I'll think I'll go out for a run down the lane,' said Betty. 'I feel as if I needed a little air and exercise.'

Penelope glanced out through the open door at the rain which was increasing, softly and steadily, but she said nothing. She knew Arthur had come to see Betty that morning, for she had heard his car; but she did not know what arrangements they might have made, and that was a matter in which she was not interfering.

She went back with her letters into the morning-room, and Betty, still standing in the hall, opened the one addressed to herself. McKay had left nothing to chance. He realised from the fact that Clifford White had not enclosed this letter with the one to his wife, that his wife was not to know of it; he realised, too, that his own writing on the envelope

might be recognised by Mrs. White and might excite remark, consequently he had directed Roach to address as well as stamping and posting the letter; thirdly, he had felt it probable that should Miss White be at all of a nervous and impulsive temperament, and should she happen to open the letter in public, the unexpected sight of her dead uncle's handwriting might cause her to start or exclaim in a fashion that might be hard to explain away; and to guard against this last contingency he had enclosed Clifford's package in a blank envelope, and had folded his own covering letter round it, so that she was likely to read that first.

It was a good thing Layland did not have to write that letter! What complicated knots he would have tied in his feelings, and how appallingly difficult he would have found it to say what he meant to say!

McKay had no such troubles.

‘DEAR MADAM,

The enclosed envelope contains a letter from your uncle, Mr. Clifford White. It was found at the same time as that which has already been despatched to Mrs. White. As the circumstances of its discovery lead me to infer that it contains matter which is intended for your eyes alone, I should suggest that it might be advisable to refrain from opening it where anyone else is likely to observe and recognise the writing——’ It passed on to formal words, condolence and conclusion, which Betty did not read.

She was strangely aware of the slowness of her own movements and even of her own sensations. A desire not to know—a sort of paralysing dread—something that hurt in the upper part of her chest.

Quite carefully, quite deliberately, she put McKay's letter into the pocket of her waterproof, thinking as she did so, 'Wouldn't do to leave that about, and feeling a detached, unemotional approval of herself for realising the importance of that.

The blank envelope was in her hands—how slow they were—how calm she was—not excited, not trembling, only a little stiff, and that queer, tight little pain in her chest.

'Betty dear, Betty!' Penelope called her from the morning-room.

Impossible to answer. Not that she couldn't speak, but that her voice would sound wrong. Not from emotion, but because of the tight feeling in her chest.

Pretend not to hear. Slip out and away from the house.

'Betty, dear, do you think you'll be back to lunch?' No answer. Penelope would think she had gone already, she was apparently speaking from the writing-table across the room. But Penelope heard the faint creak of the door, and knew that Betty must have heard her voice. There was, of course, no reason why Betty should wish to tell her how things were going or what her plans were.

A mourner among lovers—a little out of place, a little superfluous. Something of a skeleton at the feast. Well—but soon someone must ask Maurice unless he spoke for himself.

She took up Clifford's letter again and held it lovingly in her hands.

'Ah why should they think of us?' she murmured. 'We can wait.' When she thought again of Betty it was with a kind of pity for her youth, her freshness, her ignorance.

'We can wait. Let them have their turn. They will remember us presently. The dead can wait.'

She was sorry for Betty, who must think she knew so much and really knew nothing at all.

Betty meanwhile hurried down the lane. She longed to know what was in the letter, but at the same time she dreaded opening it. Her dread for a while was stronger than her longing, so that she told herself she must not stop yet because Penelope might run after her and call her back if she had really wanted her for anything important.

Besides, the wind and the rain were coming straight at her in gusts. She must find a sheltered place before she could open the letter—sheltered and secluded.

Up the long hill, splashing through liquid mud, between low, untidy hedges of bramble and thorn.

The whole world seemed open, bare, drifting before the wind. She alone opposed it, hurrying straight ahead, looking to right and left for something that stood solid.

She saw at last what she wanted. It was a hay-stack standing alone in a field by the roadside.

The tattered hedge appeared to be more of a symbol than a barrier; but she respected it none the less, and went on to the gate which was some way farther along the road. She closed it carefully behind her, replacing the chain that fastened it, and made her way back alongside the hedge to her refuge.

The driving rain had left one side of the haystack perfectly dry. Dry and dusty, with a pungent smell that made one want to sneeze. She stood in perfect shelter, leaning back against the hay, and saw the pale drizzle blowing downhill away from her like billowing gauze. The drops were so small and light and the wind so persistent that it seemed unaccountable that any water ever reached the earth at all. The rain appeared to be travelling almost horizontally, and the ground dropped steeply the way it was going, so that one would have thought that they would have got perpetually farther and farther apart. And yet the grass was wet and shiny, and the soil pale with reflections of the sky.

She took out the letter—she opened it; and then a sharp straw pricked her neck, and she moved her position slightly.

Now there was no excuse—now all her cowardice could find no possible excuse—for further delay in reading it.

Inside the blank cover she found the envelope addressed to her in her uncle's writing. She opened

that and unfolded the letter. She noticed that there was no date, that the writing was closer, stiffer, smaller—somehow more constrained—than that of his letter to Penelope.

‘DEAR BETTY,

‘I am writing this on the offchance that it may reach you. I shouldn’t be writing if it were not for your engagement to Maurice Forbes. I feel I rather encouraged that, and now I think you’ll agree with me that he isn’t the kind of person to marry. . . .

‘So it has come, so it has come,’

Betty’s mind ran on in parallel commentary all the while. ‘I don’t care, I love him, that’s all that matters.’

But at the same time another voice was saying, ‘This is Uncle Clifford, it isn’t a bit like him to be telling tales. Always over-lenient if anything—slow to think ill of anyone.’

And yet another, ‘Well I suppose Maurice had a love affair with a black woman of some kind, or Chinese. Well perhaps I ought to be upset, but I’m not. Not really. *I don’t care*. I know it’s me he really loves.’

All this was running down the margins of her mind while she read on.

‘I can’t go into details as I have written at length to Penelope, and that leaves me rather short of paper. So you must accept what I say without much detail or explanation. We had trouble with the Sakai who were with us. They left us one morning

before we were awake. Later Maurice and I disagreed and quarrelled. That was my fault as much as his. A little later I put my weight on something rotten and fell some feet down a steep place and hurt my foot rather badly. Maurice knew quite well what had happened, he saw that I was unable to stand, but he went off and left me there. I supposed at first he would come back when his temper had cooled, but he has not done so yet. We had divided supplies for convenience in carrying, and I still have a little food left, but not much.'

All Betty's marginal comments had ceased by now, she was concentrated upon her letter. Her mind simply *was* the letter, and there was no room for thought or sensation outside it.

'It is still just possible that he may return. In that case I shall destroy this. It is also possible that he has tried to do so and has met with some accident himself. So if he never turns up again anywhere one naturally hopes the best of him. The quarrel was as much my fault as his, it was natural enough to go off for an hour or two in the rage he was in. If—which I don't think at all likely—he should change his mind too late—a matter of days, not hours—and come back presently and find me dead, he will find this letter and the one to Penelope. He can't fail to see them as I have arranged matters. In that case you will be able to hear what he has to say for himself. But I confess I think that unlikely. He has already had ample time to think things over and to realise what he is doing. It seems likely

I shall die here. I still don't seem able to move more than a few steps, and I stand a better chance of being discovered on this spot than I should in any place within crawling distance. I should not tell you this, but it seems unfair not to do so. I can't think that Maurice is a person for you to marry. I have not told Penelope, it would only upset her, and there is no point in that. Besides, I do not see that it concerns her, and I think it does you, and I feel a sense of responsibility towards you.'

There the letter ended, there was no conclusion, no signature. It was of Uncle Clifford that Betty found herself thinking, not of Maurice or herself or the future. He had written to Penelope the letter she had seen already, and then this—and then—then what?

'I still have a little food left, but not much. It is still just possible that he may return. . . . It seems likely I shall die here. . . .'

After that nothing that he chose to speak about—for he could have written if he had cared to, round the address or on the back of the envelope. He was silent then from deliberate choice. From then on.

After that—no one would ever know what happened after that—no one except Uncle Clifford—and his knowledge was annulled by death. Yes—what had happened after that was all wiped out—as if it hadn't been.

What had he told Penelope? That he loved her—that he had found a flower he had never seen before——

No—her letter was written first.

‘I still have a little food left. . . .’

She did not know how long one would live after it was all gone. Besides—besides, he was dead now.

She slid down from a standing to a sitting position, still leaning close against the haystack. Water was beginning to trickle over the chaffy, dusty soil in little rivulets from the wet ground beyond the shelter of the stack.

‘I was asleep when he died,’ Maurice had said.

She found herself beginning to remember Maurice now.

‘How could he?’ she thought. ‘How could he?’

Mr. Layland had found the letters ‘near the body.’ Maurice had not gone back.

‘How could he do it? How awful. How simply awful.’

One thing was true that Maurice had said—Uncle Clifford could never have done that. Simply couldn’t—couldn’t. Her hands were growing lifeless and blue. Though she was not conscious of feeling the cold she was huddling back against the hay exactly as if she were trying to keep warm.

Again she remembered to think: ‘Mustn’t leave that about,’ and folded the letter and put it back in her pocket.

‘I can’t think that Maurice is a person for you to marry.’

She could not focus on that aspect of the matter. It was horrible. How could he do it? Such things had no right to happen. She was shocked in an

abstract, impersonal way, as by something read in the paper, she could not connect it with herself, with her own life.

‘He oughtn’t to have done it,’ she said aloud.
‘He oughtn’t to have done it.’

CHAPTER XVI

THE STORM BREAKS

‘GOOD GRACIOUS!’ THOUGHT BETTY AT LAST, ‘I wonder what the time is!’

She had come down in a hurry without her watch that morning, and had forgotten to put it on when she went back to her room after Arthur had gone. She tried to calculate the hours that must have passed since breakfast.

The letter had come by the midday post. That varied roughly between half-past eleven and half-past twelve, according to how many of the more remote farms and cottages the postman had to visit on his way. She had been, perhaps, ten minutes, perhaps a quarter of an hour, in the hall with Penelope, and she was now at least twenty-five minutes’ walk from home; but she had absolutely no notion of how long she had stood and sat under the lee of the haystack.

Now that she moved she realised how cold and numb she had grown; wet too, for though the haystack made a perfect screen from the slanting rain the ground she sat on had been overflowed by rivulets from above. Besides, she was not really what you might call dry when she first sat down. ‘Shall you be back to lunch?’ Penelope had asked, and she had not answered. Well, it looked distinctly like ‘no’ now.

It must be past lunch-time already unless the postman had been unusually early, for surely she had been under that haystack more than an hour.

And what was she going to say? What was she going to do? What in the world was she going to do or say next?

She felt like someone who happens to have been hit very hard on the head at the precise moment when there is most need for presence of mind and clear thinking.

Fiery prickles shot through and about her legs as she tried to stand up. That was the only assurance she had that they really belonged to her and not to someone else, for they refused to obey her will and to carry her weight.

She rubbed and stamped them back to a more normal state of sensation and responsiveness.

Well, one must go home.

That was how everything always ended.

Once, as a child, she had decided that she was intolerably unhappy and had run away. As it happened she had not been missed, and it had ended just like this, in a funny kind of anticlimax. She had gone home, just as she was going home now, and there had been to-morrow and the next day, just as there would be again, although it seemed impossible to imagine them.

But Maurice—Maurice——

The thought of him came back, like a pain that will not allow itself to be forgotten.

Maurice—she could not think about him clearly, it hurt her so much to remember him.

Maurice—he hadn't gone back, not even too late; for Mr. Layland had found the letters 'near the body.'

'He can't fail to see them,' Uncle Clifford had said, and Mr. Layland had not failed. They were still there for him to see. Then she felt that she was not going home till she had seen Maurice. Seen Maurice and told him that she knew this. Beyond that nothing was clear. She looked no farther than that.

'You're wet through, you must change first,' said the voice of habit and convention, the voice that earthquakes and disasters cannot altogether silence, the same voice that had warned her not to walk through the wet grass with Penelope.

This time it spoke the truth. As she moved she felt sick and exhausted with cold. She knew that she must go home and change and take the pony-trap. Impossible to walk all the way to the Forbes' house in this condition. It would really take longer, too, even if she could do it.

But then Penelope—how could she meet her? How could she avoid her? What could she say to her?

Penelope must wait—she must see Maurice first of all.

Then how could she avoid her?

A plan shaped itself as she walked. She left the road before she reached the house, cut across the fields, went in by the gate at the bottom of the garden and came to the back door.

She knew Agnes would be in her little sitting-room.

‘Why, Miss Betty——’ Agnes began at sight of her, but Betty interrupted in a frozen voice, ‘I have to go out again at once. Please bring me down some dry things and let me change here in your room. I don’t want the mistress to know I’m in, as I’m only going out again. And I want the pony-trap ready as soon as I am.’ While she was talking Agnes almost mechanically helped her out of her dripping coat.

‘I’ll just hang this by the kitchen fire,’ announced the old servant, in that prim tone in which her kind make it intolerably clear that they purposely refrain from commenting on the eccentricities of their employers.

‘And you’d better speak about the trap now, before fetching my clothes,’ Betty went on, ignoring the disapproval that Agnes was careful to imply. ‘Then it will be ready, and I shan’t have to wait.’

‘But, Miss Betty——’ Agnes expostulated; but Betty could not listen.

‘Please, Agnes, do as I ask you.’

‘Well,’ Agnes murmured as she left the room carrying the dripping coat, ‘well I declare!’

So much protest spoken under her breath she had to make to support her self-respect in such unprecedented circumstances.

Betty slipped off her shoes, which were now receptacles for rain water, took off her hat and sat down to wait. She would have foreseen what happened if she had not been partly dazed and partly indifferent.

In all her schemes for avoiding Penelope she had left Penelope herself out of account. Penelope was waiting expectant, she was listening, all on edge and alert. She had not a doubt that Arthur had come simply to arrange a meeting between Betty and Maurice later in the day. Betty's behaviour before she went out, and her failure to return to lunch, confirmed her in her certainty.

'She won't be back yet,' Penelope kept telling herself restlessly. 'She can't possibly be back yet. After so long—they will have so much to say to each other. She probably will not be back until to-night.'

'She won't come back,' she repeated, 'not yet—not yet. It would be a bad sign if she came back so soon, it would mean he was not pleased to see her.'

But yet she had a hope that Betty would let her know something somehow.

'It is natural they should forget me for a while,' she thought.

But perhaps Arthur would come. She listened for the wheels of his car on the gravel.

After lunch she wandered out into the garden for a few minutes, but the wet and the autumnal aspect of things depressed her. She strayed back into the house. It was impossible to settle to anything—and yet Betty might not be back until night.

Presently she sat down in the morning-room once more, and read Clifford's letter over again. Now that she knew the wording almost by heart, she tried to imagine him writing it; but for want of any hint of the circumstances she failed. She could only picture him, as she had often seen him, sitting at his

own writing-table by the window. And then she realised that all the while she had unconsciously pictured him writing this letter sitting up at a table in perfect health.

But he was ill—he was dying—when he wrote.

Hurriedly she turned back and read it over again. How strange that there was no hint of sickness from first to last—nothing to disturb the mental image which she had been forming unconsciously! That he wrote expecting to die quite soon was evident from what he said; but there was no suggestion of the circumstances or manner of his approaching death.

‘He thought Maurice would tell us all that,’ she reflected, ‘and he had so much to say of other things.’

Maurice? But Maurice had not brought the letter—and Maurice had told them nothing except——

And that was a lie.

Suddenly she saw that the one thing that Maurice had told them was unquestionably a lie.

Fever! There was no sign of it from first to last in the writing, the phrasing, or the thought.

She pictured him as she had always seen him because he wrote as he had always written.

It was a lie. Maurice had told them a lie. Clifford had not died of a fever.

She sprang up and ran restlessly through the house, in and out of the different rooms, half looking for Betty, although she knew that she was out.

Finding herself in her own bedroom, she put on her coat and hat, with the idea of running out along

the road to meet Betty coming back; but she checked herself, for Betty had not taken the pony-trap, that could only mean that Arthur was going to pick her up somewhere with his car, she could not intend to go all that way on foot on a day like this.

No knowing, then, which way they might have gone.

Back she came to the morning-room; but she did not stay there long. Her own room, which was upstairs and in the front of the house, commanded the best view of the road in both directions. She returned there and sat by the window watching and waiting.

Nothing escaped her that passed along the road; but Betty had left it before the turn which brought it in sight of the house, and followed, not the usual field path, but an awkward, circuitous route, chosen with no other purpose but that of avoiding observation.

Even there Penelope found it impossible to sit still because of the riotous tumult in her mind.

She had left Clifford's letter downstairs; and she felt that now she must read it again in the light of her new certainty, and examine it for any hint or indication which she might have overlooked before.

So down to the morning-room once again.

Agnes had gone up the back staircase, but it did not occur to her to modify her footfall in Betty's bedroom, which happened to be just over the morning-room where Penelope was sitting. Penelope heard a movement, and all her patience went to the winds. She flew upstairs.

‘Betty! Betty!’ she cried, and swirled into the room. She all but ran into the solid and slow-moving Agnes, who was just coming out with a pile of clothes in her arms.

‘Oh, M’om, you did give me a start!’ panted Agnes quite truthfully. She set down her pile upon a chair, and stooped to pick up a pair of shoes and some rolled-up stockings which had escaped her in her agitated effort to avoid collision.

Penelope looked about in a breathless, bewildered way.

‘But where is Betty?’ she asked.

She had been so certain of seeing her that the thing was like a transformation, as surprising as though Betty had been changed into Agnes before her eyes. Seeing only the totally unexpected, she had no time to realise that her expectations were ill-founded, or to reflect, ‘then it must have been Agnes I heard moving upstairs.’

‘Where is Betty?’ she repeated.

It is often the small, uncalculated factor that proves decisive. Betty had been far too much distressed herself to notice that Agnes was distinctly huffed by her cold, peremptory tone and her uncommunicative manner. She was still giddy from a blow which left her hardly able to speak, but Agnes had no means of knowing that, and felt at the moment no obligation and no inclination to tell lies or exert ingenuity on Betty’s behalf. Consequently she received Penelope’s exclamatory questioning in silence.

This might have seemed strange, but Agnes had her moods, they were known and respected by the

whole household. They were held to be inevitable, like the variations of the weather. Her silence conveyed nothing to Penelope; and a moment's reflection told her that Betty had not been in the room at all, and that there was no reason to suppose that Agnes knew more of her movements than anyone else. Clifford's nurse used her privilege to treat them all like children, and no doubt her stony manner was meant as a rebuke for asking silly questions.

'I heard you, and thought Betty had come in,' Penelope explained, 'but what are you doing with all those clothes?'

'I was just about to take them downstairs,' Agnes replied, stiffly.

Had she been in a different mood she might have added that they were things that needed mending, or some other little piece of invention; but if Miss Betty chose to keep her in the dark how was she to help it if she did say the wrong thing?

'Taking them downstairs?' Penelope repeated uncomprehendingly; and then she looked at them as she would not have done had she been given a more convincing and intelligible answer; and when she saw what they were she understood.

A coat—shoes—stockings—a tweed skirt—underclothes. The inference was obvious. She knew that Betty had come in and was downstairs.

'Oh!' she said. 'Oh!'

She stared at Agnes wide-eyed, with a sudden terror for which she could not have accounted.

'Where is she?' she asked again.

'I couldn't say Ma'am,' Agnes replied woodenly, thereby avoiding both a direct lie and a directly disloyal truth. Penelope did not press her. She whirled out of the room again and down the back stairs, crying 'Betty! Betty! Where are you?'

Betty had sat down by the fire in Agnes's tiny sitting-room, and was warming her feet inside the fender. As she rested the thought came into her mind—the thought that so often comes in life's worst moments. 'but suppose after all it were not true?' And then another more cowardly thought, 'if only the letter had never been found!'

The letter! As her mind rested on it for a moment she remembered that she had left it in the pocket of her raincoat, which Agnes had taken to the kitchen! Insanity! It must never be out of her possession, never for a moment!

She jumped up and ran down the passage. Her wet-stockinged feet left the marks of bare toes on the red-tiled floor of the kitchen.

'My coat,' she said, 'there are some things in the pocket I want.'

She did not see who gave it her, she snatched the letters and turned. The door of the kitchen was just opposite the foot of the back staircase. She was scarcely outside when she heard a swirl of impetuous skirts and a cry, 'Betty! Betty! Where are you going?' There was no time to retreat; there was no time to think; she was caught by Penelope like a leaf by a whirlwind.

'Betty! What is it? Tell me what has happened! The truth, Betty, tell me the truth!'

'Oh, Pen!' gasped Betty, her mind reeling before this sudden assault.

'What does she know?' She wondered confusedly, 'what does she suspect?'

Agnes was now heard labouring down the stairs behind them.

'One moment, Pen,' Betty gasped. 'All right, Agnes; just take them back again. I'll come up directly.'

'Well, I hope you will, Miss,' Agnes retorted crisply, 'for you'll catch your death if not.'

'Yes, Agnes, don't worry,' Betty answered; and then Penelope swept her away from the shadow of the staircase, saying, 'we can't talk here, come into the morning-room.'

In the clearer light she saw Betty's face, and knew at once that something terrible had happened.

'The truth, child; tell me the truth!'

Sick with apprehension, Betty clutched the letters in her hand. Her dress had no pocket, the top of her stocking, the elastic that held her knickers above the knee were both too far away, her waistband too obvious, between the buttons of her blouse to the top of her stays too awkward and difficult of access. She could think of nothing to do but to hold them as she was doing, keeping her hand inconspicuously against her side.

'You have seen him—I know you have seen him! What did he say? Tell me the truth. Tell me all the whole truth.'

Betty realised numbly that it was useless to deny that she had met Maurice. Indeed, Penelope had

far better think that she had. Yesterday's meeting, which she had not yet spoken, would have to do of duty for the one Penelope imagined her to have had to-day.

'What did he say?' Penelope broke out again, 'Tell me, what did he say?'

What had he said? What had Maurice said yesterday? Betty found herself almost forgetting. 'He said: Oh he said that Uncle Clifford died of a fever——'

'But what else? That is nothing. That is what he told Arthur the first night he came back. And Betty it is not true——'

'Not true!' Betty echoed dizzily.

'No, it cannot be true. He cannot have died of a fever. His own letter—that proves it was a lie.'

'But he doesn't say what he was dying of, does he?' Betty interposed feebly.

'Something that left his head clear and his hand steady when he was enough ill to be certain of death. You remember the letter. Is it the writing of a man dying of fever? Is it the letter? Is it the thoughts?'

'Oh, Pen,' Betty murmured weakly.

'What did Maurice tell you?' Penelope insisted, 'What has he been telling you just now?'

'Nothing—only that. Only that, and—yes—he did say—he said he was asleep when Uncle Clifford died.'

'He said that!'

'Yes, and he seemed——'

And that he died of a fever?' Penelope interrupted her.

‘Yes.’

‘Well, that at least is a lie. And how is it that this letter from Clifford to me was left there with the body for Mr. Layland to find and to send? Why did he not bring it himself? Why did Clifford not entrust it to him? What does he say to that?’

‘He didn’t—I couldn’t—I didn’t ask him,’ Betty faltered, ‘he was too most awfully upset.’

‘Betty—Betty,’ Penelope expostulated. ‘What is it you are not telling me? What has he told you that you must keep from me?’

‘Nothing,’ Betty assured her eagerly, ‘Nothing but what I have told you.’

‘Then I will tell you what I think,’ Penelope declared. ‘I think that Maurice was not with Clifford when he died.’

‘He was asleep,’ Betty protested, feeling herself turn suddenly cold.

‘He tells you that—but to hide—what? He was not with him when he died, and I must find out the reason. I shall see him myself—and he shall tell me!’

‘Oh no, Pen,’ Betty implored, losing her head completely. ‘Don’t you see he may have had to leave him for all kinds of reasons—he may have had to get food or fetch help—or——’

‘It might be so,’ Penelope interrupted, ‘but why did he say he was asleep?’

‘Pen—dear’—Betty wailed, ‘what are you imagining?’

‘Why did he not bring me the letter?’ Penelope went on. ‘Why did he say that Clifford died of a fever?’

‘Oh, I don’t know!’ Betty lamented.

‘You do, you do know,’ Penelope cried with sudden vehement conviction in her voice. ‘You do know. I can see you do. You are playing with me—you and Maurice.’

‘Penelope—dearest——’ Betty began to plead gathering her wits as she went along. ‘The last thing—the very last thing—Uncle Clifford could ever want would be to make a row—a fuss—about his death. Don’t you see, he was able to write, if there was anything he had wanted us to know, couldn’t he—wouldn’t he have told us himself? Can’t we—oughtn’t we to—respect his wishes and allow him to keep his secret, supposing he has one?’

‘You plead too well,’ Penelope answered gloomily. ‘You know too much.’

‘And will you marry Maurice now?’ she challenged her suddenly.

‘Oh,’ gasped Betty changing colour and quite unable to answer the question. Penelope pressed her advantage.

‘What has happened? What has Maurice told you?’

‘Nothing,’ Betty declared, rallying all her forces, ‘Nothing but what I told you. He said that Uncle Clifford died of a fever, that he couldn’t have prevented it, but that he felt he was to blame because he was asleep at the time.’

‘Then what he told you was a lie, and you know it, and I must have the truth.’

‘Oh, Pen. But Pen—do try to think of Uncle Clifford himself and what he would want. You know—he was fond of Mrs. Forbes—you can’t imagine

him doing anything to hurt an old lady like that and an invalid——'

'But who talks of hurting Mrs. Forbes? *Will* the truth hurt her? It is the truth I want.'

'Uncle Clifford wrote—he has told us—what he wanted us to know.'

'What he wanted——But what is it that *you* know? What did Maurice tell you? What is it that you are keeping from me?'

'Nothing, nothing at all. He told me that Uncle Clifford died of a fever, and that he was asleep when it happened. That he blamed himself because of it, but couldn't have prevented it if he had been awake.'

Betty had that kind of literalness of mind which enables some people to speak with more conviction when they are telling a verbal truth, even though their object may be to mislead.

Penelope looked at her searchingly and found herself forced to believe her.

'Nothing but that? But yet you do know something, and you will not tell me.'

'How you know is no matter. *What* it is Maurice can tell me as well as you.'

It seemed to Betty that of all things on earth it was most essential to prevent an encounter between Penelope and Maurice.

'You've guessed, Pen,' she admitted. 'I do know something. I can't help it, and you won't believe me if I say I don't. But it's something I can't—I've no right to repeat. It isn't from Maurice I heard it. He said—what I told you—only that. Uncle

Clifford—if he'd wanted you to know—could have told you himself.'

'Ah—then Maurice has brought you a letter from him!'

'No, no,' Betty interposed unnoticed.

'And so you can say he told you nothing. Show it me—let me see it. Show it me at once.'

'But I—he——' Betty gasped quite helplessly.

'Show it me.' Penelope insisted.

'But he says I'm not to—Uncle Clifford himself says I'm not to.'

'Show it me, show it me,' she stormed. 'Do you think my patience is eternal?'

Betty felt that in another minute Penelope would fly at her, that she would have to defend herself as best she could and that it would be impossible to keep the letter hidden. She looked about desperately for some means of hiding it, some way of getting it out of her hand.

'It's in the pocket of my coat, which is drying in the kitchen.'

'Then what's that you have there?' cried Penelope, catching sight of it at last, no doubt on account of some awkward effort at further concealment on Betty's part.

'That—nothing—it's in my coat—Uncle Clifford's letter.'

'Then give me that first——'

Penelope attacked like a whirlwind. Betty knew herself hopelessly outclassed, but she managed for a moment to wrench her arm free and toss the letter, which was now a crumpled ball, into the

fireplace. It was a lucky shot, but the paper was damp and crushed, so that it did not burn readily, and Penelope had it out again before it was seriously damaged.

‘No, Penelope, no!’ cried Betty trying to snatch it away. ‘It’s not meant for you. Uncle Clifford didn’t want you to see it. It’s about Maurice. Uncle Clifford didn’t want me to marry him. It’s only that. Give it back.’

‘Let me alone,’ Penelope exclaimed. ‘Let me alone, you make me angry. Let me alone, or I shall really hurt you.’

‘Remember,’ Betty entreated; ‘do try to think what Uncle Clifford would want. You see he specially says I’m not to tell you.’ She saw that Penelope had read enough for it to be useless to try to get the letter away. Better in fact that she should read the whole of it now she had read so much.

Penelope read to the end, and then looked at Betty with a kind of amazed, incredulous contempt.

‘And you?’ she asked witheringly, ‘you meant to keep this secret?’

‘No,’ Betty answered, ‘it was Uncle Clifford meant it, not I.’

‘You’—Penelope went on accusingly—‘you his niece, his sister’s child, the nearest relation he has, you meant to hide this!’

‘How dramatic she is, and how foreign!’ commented the observant and unemotional side of Betty’s mind. ‘How like those terrible women in Norse sagas who spent their time urging their menfolk to deeds of vengeance!’

'You meant to hide this?'

'I meant nothing,' Betty protested, 'nothing at all. Read his letter. Don't you see it was he that meant it, not I?'

'You screen his murderer—you——'

'Murderer! Oh, Pen——'

'Worse than that—worse——' cried Penelope fiercely, 'a murderer the law can't touch.'

'If Uncle Clifford were here,' Betty entreated, 'remember him—imagine he is speaking——'

Penelope broke at that.

'Ah! he will never speak to me again,' she screamed, and threw herself down on the sofa,

'Pen—if you love him——' Betty persisted.

'He's dead!' Penelope sobbed. 'He's dead—he's dead! When he was alive I lived only to please him, but now he's dead—he does not know. How can I please him now?'

'Pen—dear!' Betty implored her.

'He's dead,' Penelope went on, 'and his murderer alive. How can you bear to live in a world where Clifford is dead and Maurice is alive?'

'But he only told me so that I shouldn't marry Maurice. Read the letter again—see what he says. He didn't want anyone to know!'

'Ah, but did he want to die?' cried Penelope catching at her words and letting her meaning go, 'and yet, you see, he is dead!'

'He didn't even want you to know,' Betty repeated.

'To know! Ah everyone shall know. It is right that everyone should know. That is all there is left to do. All there is left to do for him.'

She buried her face in the sofa cushions, still clutching the letter in her hand. There was nothing to be done. Betty saw that she had no power of control or persuasion. She felt that she had better drive over to the Forbes' as quickly as she could and warn Arthur of all that had happened.

The pony-trap was ready, that would give her a start of Penelope. She knocked at the door of Agnes's room. 'Well, Miss,' Agnes began reproachfully, but Betty cut her short.

'I'm going to change at once. Then I have to go out. You must look after the mistress. She's not herself.'

'What, Miss? Another turn like the last?'

'Yes—or worse.'

'Then you'll fetch the doctor?'

'Oh no—we don't want him. But look after her. I must go.' She darted upstairs to her room, but all she did there was to put on dry shoes over her wet stockings and a thick coat over her wet clothes. She wondered whether Penelope would hear the pony-trap start. Well, even if she did she could not stop her going now. As a matter of fact Penelope heard nothing but her own sobbing, and was conscious of nothing but her own passion of grief and rage.

CHAPTER XVII

BRIEF RESPITE

WE ARE ALL OF US A LITTLE READY TO FORGET THAT others besides ourselves may be able to sustain a part or to carry through a piece of deception successfully. It certainly marked a stage in Maurice's recovery that he found himself both able and determined to behave more ordinarily; but Mrs. Forbes and Arthur fancied that it was the beginning of his return to normal life, not, as it was really, the mark of his decision that any such return was impossible. His decision to go away gave him a sense of power over himself and circumstances. He found himself able to bear their society without irritation because he knew that it was not for long. And somehow, inexplicably, this decision of his and the sense of freedom that it gave him were blent with his new hold upon the outside world. The two lines of escape were really one, or at least they were interdependent, and each implied the other. He was elated and yet calm, not realising that his deliverance was precarious and incomplete.

His mother and brother watched him, almost holding their breath, but careful to give no sign; and he, with quite unconscious cruelty, raised their hopes and cheered their spirits by a deliberate show of pleasure in their company and interest in their concerns.

Instead of slipping away after lunch alone or with Lizzy, he proposed to his mother that as the rain had stopped he should wheel her about the garden in her chair before she went upstairs to rest. The suggestion was made with an artful air of spontaneity, as though it were a thing that one did as often as not.

She hesitated, delighted and flattered by his offer, but afraid on the one hand of his straining or over-tiring himself, and on the other of letting him feel that she was coddling him and fussing after his health. Maurice, with his new sense of detached, impersonal observation, noticed her hesitation and guessed its cause. He noticed, too, with interest, his own complete absence of irritation or resentment. He felt like a gloriously disembodied spirit observing the world with a kindly impersonal concern.

‘Come on, Arthur, let’s get the chair out, you are the strong man of the party,’ he said; thereby making it unnecessary for Arthur to say ‘shan’t I help you?’ or Mrs. Forbes to ask, ‘Do you think you can manage?’

They wandered slowly round the garden, renewing a customary and evergreen discussion as to whether a certain group of trees ought not to be thinned out, and if so which were the ones to be taken. Whatever the merits of the matter may have been years ago when the question was first raised, there was no doubt the trees did need thinning now; but which should be taken and which should be left was still a subject for controversy.

Mrs. Forbes heard Maurice give his opinion in a downright, dogmatic fashion, defending this tree and that which he loved for definite individual reasons, snubbing Arthur, who would have liked to consider the appearance of the group as a whole; and she trembled, not daring to trust her joy.

‘It’s as if he had never gone away.’

She tried not to think it, for fear of offending jealous listening gods.

They walked on, leaving the question, as ever, undecided.

They paused a moment by the shrubbery and examined the state of the pets’ cemetery, where many generations of cats and dogs, one grey parrot, one tortoise, and one Belgian hare had been laid to rest. Rabbits, mice, and guinea-pigs had been buried thereabouts as well, but somehow none of them ever seemed to have displayed enough individual personality to entitle it to any permanent monument. One just planted some sturdy perennial on top and remembered the place for a while so that it might not be dug up again too soon. Wild birds, weasels, rats, and so on were given only temporary interment, preferably in an ant heap.

‘I wonder where my collection of skulls is,’ Maurice reflected.

‘It’s up in the boxroom; I saw it just the other day,’ Arthur replied, masking his thrilling appreciation of the significance of the inquiry with a quiet, casual, conversational tone. Secret currents of sympathy between him and his mother; indeed they had almost ceased to be two individuals, so much were

their thoughts at one. There was no need of a word or a look to carry a message between them.

They read the inscriptions and dates on the grave-stones and recalled the fates and characters and peculiarities of all the animals commemorated. Many of them Arthur could not remember at all, some only Mrs. Forbes could speak of from first-hand knowledge.

They were a strange, mixed crowd—dogs that might have won prizes had they ever been shown, and wretched mongrels adopted out of pity—fierce, wary old farm cats that had grown partially tame and learnt to play with the children, and lovely, fastidious little pets that spent their days on the drawing-room cushions—sullen, affectionate, trustful, suspicious, lethargic, excitable, absurdly snobbish, embarrassingly democratic—the same number of human beings could hardly have presented a more striking series of contrasts than was remembered among cats and among dogs.

The Belgian hare, too—what a quaint, independent character he was! What a contrast to the beautiful, variously-coated but uniformly-mindless rabbits! The tortoise—really he hardly deserved his tombstone—he had done nothing worthy of a monument, except just go on being a tortoise.

‘Just like some people,’ commented Mrs. Forbes, thinking of her husband’s aunts, from whose inertia she had suffered much in the early days of her marriage.

Actually the guinea-pigs had displayed more evidence of soul than they or the tortoise. But the

grey parrot, who lay beside him—he undoubtedly had soul enough for two, though his soul was probably a lost one.

They sauntered on, varying reminiscences of childhood with comments on the present state of the garden and suggestions for its future improvement.

Maurice was not being intentionally cruel; partly he was enjoying his sense of self-control, and partly he was deliberately planning to leave pleasant memories behind him when he went away for the last time.

They came back to the house, and Mrs. Forbes went upstairs to rest, as she always did in the afternoon. Arthur went to put the chair away in the corner of the garage.

He was beginning to fret again, and to wonder what he must do next. His instinct was to leave things alone, to ask no questions and to wait for time to heal the sore places in Maurice's mind before he risked touching them. But then there was Penelope to consider, and Betty. No use leaving Maurice alone unless they were prepared to do so too, and they were showing signs of impatience. If anyone was going to be tactless he'd far better do it himself—and yet he was very reluctant to interfere while things were changing so rapidly for the better; for he felt that a touch—the slightest, most well-meant touch in the world—if it just came in the wrong place, might upset it all. One was afraid to move, afraid to stir, but yet things were moving all round one, and to keep still oneself might be the one most fatal error of all. What immense caution was exercised in deal-

ing with people's bodies, how little with their minds! This was the normal equivalent of being forced to do a surgical operation in the dark, without an anæsthetic, and with only the very haziest knowledge of anatomy! Were people's souls of so very much less account than their bodies? No—but one simply hadn't any proper outfit for dealing with them.

So he was reflecting despondently when Maurice joined him.

'I say, Arthur, I want to talk to you. Let's go down the garden again.'

'All right. I'll just finish putting this away first.'

He was careful to make his voice indifferent, careful to give no sign of what he really felt; and yet it never struck him as conceivable that Maurice might at any point have been doing the same kind of thing.

They walked slowly down the garden together.

It was queer. Maurice found it harder to speak than he had foreseen. He had imagined that the victory was won, and that his mind was stable and clear, so that he could say what he chose without passion or fret. He did not realise that such a long habit of soul sickness cannot be broken at one stroke and in a few hours.

'I didn't mean what I said, when I said it yesterday,' he began, and as he spoke he felt himself growing angry with Arthur for what he supposed him to be thinking. 'But I do mean it now.' In spite of himself his voice sounded husky and queer. That angered him still more.

‘And I want you to help me arrange it, and convince everyone that it’s the best thing for me to do,’ he ended abruptly, speaking, to his own intense disgust, with manifest emotion.

‘I daresay it is,’ Arthur agreed readily. ‘Why not board with the Handleys for a little at Lower Place Farm? I could run over in the car this evening and arrange it with them.’

Nothing on earth is more annoying than to have one’s decisions assented to in principle and at the same time taken out of one’s hands and so altered in detail that they become something quite useless for one’s own purpose. Maurice had expected to meet with a certain amount of resistance, he fancied he was prepared to persuade, to insist. That he would find Arthur ready with a rival scheme had never crossed his mind. It shook him a little from the detachment that was far less real than he imagined.

‘I thought I’d rather go to town,’ he said sulkily. Arthur did not want to oppose him, but yet—‘Alone?’ he demurred. ‘Do you think you’re quite fit?’

Maurice interrupted.

‘Alone?’ he snapped. ‘I don’t know what you mean. I suppose I can stay alone in a hotel if I like!’

He felt the surge of trouble rising in his mind. The outer world could only help him while he fixed his mind upon it and talked of indifferent matters. As soon as he talked and thought of himself and his needs and desires the old irritation, the old

senseless rage, the old self-pity and self-contempt rose and choked him.

‘But—but why? What’s up?’ Arthur hesitated.

‘Nothing. Nothing’s up at all. I’ve some business in town I want to see to.’

Arthur was too experienced to realise that too ready assent may be far more irritating than opposition.

‘Why, of course, we’ll arrange it if you want to—but do you think you are quite up to it?’

Maurice’s mind was still raw. A touch on that side was intolerable.

‘I’m not up to having you all chasing round after me and watching me and thinking about me and saying I’m a little worse or a little better to-day. I must—I must get away.’

‘All right, don’t get ratty,’ Arthur protested, with a confused, desperate sense that one must try to behave naturally—not as if one thought Maurice ill or queer—not as if one were making allowances for him.

The unexpected check to the flow of his irritation bewildered Maurice for a moment. He was startled—taken aback. He had not expected that somehow.

‘Let’s sit down,’ he proposed suddenly.

Arthur looked with some misgiving at the stone bench which he indicated. It was very wet indeed. In fact where it had worn the water lay in shallow puddles.

‘Rather moist, I think,’ he objected unhappily. ‘Shan’t we go in again?’

‘Damn!’ said Maurice, quite quietly and bitterly, and they turned and began to walk slowly back.

'I must go,' Maurice repeated. 'I can't stick it here'—this was not in the very least how he had meant to put it—'But before I go I must see—Betty.'

To his disgust he found that he could hardly say her name.

'She'll be awfully glad to see you. I'll run over at once and fetch her——'

(Oh, sickening how Arthur simply bounded to carry out his wishes. And Betty—he was going to tell her—and suddenly he remembered again what he was going to tell her. Back came the trouble in strong pulsing waves. The outer world was gone, lost and drowned, scarcely visible even as a transparency. His soul was once more a blind, crying sense of shame and horror and intolerable stress.)

'But I say!' exclaimed Arthur, turning to investigate a sound behind him, 'I shan't have to go after all. She's here, she's coming, she's driving up to the house.'

Wave upon wave the trouble rose, each wave overwhelming the last, so that his spirit could not breathe.

'I can't,' he cried in a feverish panic. 'I can't see her now. Don't let her. I can't—I wasn't expecting. Stay here and talk to her. I'm going. I can't—*don't you see* I can't until I've thought what I mean to say?'

'But I say, Maurice——' Arthur began to protest.

'Oh I know—yes—I know about that. I'll come back. I'll see her. I must see her. But go and talk to her now. Look, she's just going to ring the bell.'

Why it should have seemed to Maurice a necessary prelude to irretrievable disaster that Betty should ring the bell it is impossible to say, unless because he was in a kind of mood in which the next thing likely to happen is apt to appear as such.

Arthur gave him a troubled glance; saw that, for whatever reason, he certainly was far too much agitated to be made to meet anyone he did not want to, and ran up to the house just as Betty was going up the steps to the front door.

‘Hullo, Betty!’ he called to her as he approached.

She turned at his voice and her frozen, unsmiling face dried up all he had to say to her. She spoke at once before he could find any form of inquiry.

‘Oh, Arthur, I’m glad——’ he heard the word ‘glad’ with a shudder; she looked so desolate as she said it that nothing could have had a more ominous sound. ‘What luck to find you—by yourself—like this.’

‘Maurice——’ he began, but she interrupted him.

‘No—it’s you I want. At least I think it is. Oh, Arthur—I don’t know what to do.’

‘Come and sit down,’ he suggested, for Betty was trembling, whether with cold or with emotion. ‘Wait a minute—I’ll just call Hooker to see to the pony.’

He took her into the library, where there was a large fire. She sank down into an arm-chair and sat staring ahead. She took off her gloves—she looked at Arthur and looked away again.

‘Well, what is it?’ he encouraged her. ‘Won’t you tell me about it?’

'I'm trying to,' she answered blankly, and there was a moment's silence.

'What is it, Betty?' he asked uneasily.

She looked at him pitifully, and tried to speak. Then, 'I must tell you,' she muttered. 'I must tell, you know. There's no time to waste. I wouldn't tell you—only Penelope knows——'

'What—what is it?' Every moment Arthur found himself growing more uncomfortable.

'There was a letter—a letter from Uncle Clifford——'

'Yes—you told me about it,' Arthur reminded her.

'No—another. One for me. I'd show it you, only Pen got it. She took it away from me. Uncle Clifford—didn't want her to know.'

'But what, Betty?'

'What I'm trying to tell you——'

She felt utterly incapable of putting the thing into words. Wild speculations danced through Arthur's mind of which the most plausible seemed to be that Clifford was not dead at all, but had run away with someone else.

'I wish you'd try to tell me,' he protested.

'Oh, Arthur, can't you see how hard I'm trying?' she moaned.

'He didn't want *anyone* to know,' she went on in a tired voice. 'He wrote to me—only to me—because he wanted me not to marry Maurice. You see—he thought badly of him because of what happened!'

She could not get it out. It was wedged somehow in her chest. Hurting. Too large.

'But what happened?'

'This—just this I'm trying to tell you. Oh, I wish I had the letter—Uncle Cliff had an accident. He hurt himself. Hurt his foot. And Maurice—Maurice went on—and left him there—and never came back.'

'Left him? What do you mean? Left him where?'

'Oh, I don't know—just *there*—just wherever they were. Just—well—just I suppose where—where Mr. Layland found him.'

'You don't mean,' said Arthur in a strange, troubled voice—'You can't mean left him *alone*?'

Betty nodded and gulped.

'But, Betty,' he reasoned anxiously, 'that isn't possible. They wouldn't have *been* alone.'

'They were. Don't you remember—they'd had trouble with the Sakai and they'd left them.'

'But he left him—he must have left him for some good reason—meaning to come back——'

She shook her head drearily.

'But I say,' Arthur expostulated, his voice growing more and more frightened all the while, 'there must be some mistake——'

'I don't think so. I'm afraid not. Oh, Arthur, you'd better believe me! D'you think I'd be in a hurry to believe it myself?'

She felt she simply could not argue the thing step by step and point by point, but she saw that she very well might have to.

'I can't believe,' he objected. 'I simply can't—there must be—I mean to say—some kind of explanation. He can't, I mean, just have walked away deliberately and *left* him.'

‘Explanation? Deliberately? They’d quarrelled, he said. They’d had a row.’

‘But even so—I can’t believe——’ he floundered helplessly, ‘that *Maurice*——’

‘No,’ she answered him wearily, ‘but if not can you believe that Uncle Clifford would say so?’

The last thing that Betty had anticipated was that she would have to convince Arthur step by step. She had hurried to warn him, and to ask his advice. She had not thought of how to convince him. How did she herself know it was true? Partly her uncle’s character, partly the way that his statements explained everything that had puzzled her up till now.

‘And if Cliff died of a fever,’ Arthur suggested hopefully, ‘don’t you think he may have been a little queer in his head?’

‘He wasn’t ill at all when he wrote; you could see that from both of the letters.’

‘But perhaps Maurice had to leave him for something—he may have thought it the best thing to do to try to get help—and then he may have come back——’

Betty felt that she would never be able to explain unless she could show him the letter. He would go on endlessly finding seemingly valid objections.

‘I wish I thought so, but I don’t, and I’ve seen the letter and you haven’t. But, Arthur—what about Penelope? I didn’t like leaving her, but I felt I ought to see you and tell you this——’

‘What’—— he hesitated—‘what does she make of it?’

‘Well——’ Betty answered significantly, and then added, ‘one quite sees why Uncle Cliff didn’t want her to know.’

‘But what—what do you think she’ll *do*?’

‘She says everyone ought to know, and that’s all there is left to do.’

‘Mother?’ Arthur suggested tentatively.

‘Well—we have to think of her,’ Betty agreed. ‘And besides—perhaps—I don’t know—I keep having such horrible sensational ideas—she said one thing—she said he was a murderer—a murderer the law can’t touch.’

‘Good Lord!’ Arthur murmured.

‘Look here,’ she went on, ‘I think I must be getting back. I—you’ll have to talk to Maurice, I think. I simply daren’t leave Pen. We know her so little really. One has no feeling of ‘she wouldn’t do this,’ or ‘she couldn’t do that.’ Uncle Cliff, who was the only one who knew her, simply tried to arrange that she shouldn’t know.’

‘But I say, Betty—I’m convinced there’s some mistake. Maurice has something—just now—that he’s wanting to tell you. I believe you’ll get to the bottom of this and find out it’s not as bad as you think.’

‘Oh, Arthur, how I wish I could!’

‘You’ll see Maurice, then, won’t you?’

‘Yes. If only he could tell me this wasn’t true. Look here, Arthur, you get your car out so that you can run me home again. It’s so much quicker!’

It also occurred to Betty that if the pony remained at this end of the road, its absence hampered and delayed Penelope’s movements.

They came to the front door together.

'I'll find him,' said Arthur, 'but if he's changed his mind and doesn't want to talk to you, then I'll tell him what you've come about, and perhaps he'll explain either to you or to me.'

'And about Pen——' Betty began, but at this moment Arthur opened the door and Betty stepped out, and found herself face to face with Maurice, who was crossing the drive with the evident intention of coming into the house.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE WHOLE STORY

MAURICE MEANWHILE HAD BEEN WALKING FEVER-ishly up and down the vegetable garden, where he was hidden from the house and from the front drive. One moment he was accusing and humbling himself, calling himself every vile name he could think of, the next he was defending himself passionately and pitifully.

'It was not my fault—it made no difference,' and more in the same strain.

Then again he found himself assuring the absent and unhearing Betty that he was an outcast and a worm and a leper, not fit to come near her, not fit for her to look at or to think about; and then he was accusing her of unfairness and harshness in her judgments, pleading with her for a little more understanding, a little more sympathy, a little more imagination.

'You don't know what it was like,' he found himself telling her, 'you don't understand how it happened.'

Next he was trying to move her pity by describing his remorse and misery and all that he had been through since. Not for a moment did his state of mind remain consistent. One emotion broke over another like wave upon wave. No sentence completed

itself in his mind—self-accusation, self-pity, self-defence, self-abhorrence, he could scarcely be said to pass from one mood to the other, they were all mingled and churned together. At the same moment he was feeling the utmost loathing for his own existence, and was phrasing in his mind words of bitter protest against what he felt would be the severe judgment of his friends, of Betty, and of the world; and while he was protesting bitterly that after all he had not been so much to blame, he was longing with intense sickness of desire for something more than death, more than annihilation, longing that so hateful a thing as himself might be utterly forgotten for ever, might never have been born, never thought of or imagined.

Up and down he walked, up and down, raving in his soul although he said not a word aloud. Then suddenly, on an impulse he did not understand and did not stay to examine, he turned and walked quickly back towards the house.

Just as he reached the front door Betty and Arthur came out together.

A return—a momentary return—of his old fretful irritability—Arthur and Betty—together—talking about him—how queer he was—how strangely he behaved.

He looked at them with that expression of constrained distaste that Arthur had learnt to know so well, and spoke in an abrupt, half-smothered voice.

‘Betty, I want to speak to you.’

Betty turned white and half stepped back, but Maurice was too much wrought up himself to be

observant of the moods of others. He turned to his brother, not noticing the effect of his words or his appearance upon Betty.

‘Arthur, I want to speak to Betty.’

Betty looked wildly at Arthur, then cast a panic-stricken glance down the drive towards the gate.

‘Suppose Penelope should come now,’ she thought, but dared not say.

Fortunately the same idea had occurred to Arthur, suggested no doubt by the last words Betty had spoken to him, ‘About Pen——’ He decided to see that his car was ready and the garage doors open, and then to take his stand near the gate, where he must see Penelope if she came. As to what he could do with her then he was all in the dark; but one must hope for the best, and at least he would know what was going on.

Betty and Maurice faced each other, she on the doorstep, he just below her on the drive.

‘There’s something I must tell you,’ he said. He had been pale the moment before, but he reddened as he spoke.

‘I know already,’ Betty answered, her voice and face expressionless as she looked at him.

‘Good heavens!’ he exclaimed, ‘*what* do you know?’

She could only speak with difficulty because all the inside of her chest had frozen into a hard, solid lump that hurt wherever it touched any part of her that was still alive.

‘Uncle Clifford wrote to me,’ she said.

‘What!’ he exclaimed, and his colour faded, leaving him chalky.

Betty felt a kind of detached, impersonal pity at the sight of him.

‘Let’s go somewhere else,’ she said, ‘we can’t very well talk on the doorstep.’

In a dream he followed her back to the library, where she and Arthur had been talking a few minutes before.

‘Sit down,’ she said, and did so herself.

‘Wrote?’ he whispered, ‘wrote—Clifford wrote?’

He had an odd, dizzy sensation, as though the world were dissolving round him, and as though the impossible might happen any minute.

‘Yes—he wrote. There was a letter—found near the body.’

She could hardly finish the sentence.

‘Near the body’—she had been using the phrase in her own mind ever since she had read it in Layland’s letter, but now suddenly it came over her like a breath of hot stifling wind that it was Uncle Clifford she was talking about.

‘Maurice, you were right,’ she cried in sudden pain, ‘Uncle Clifford would never have done that to you!’

‘I wish I was dead,’ he answered sharply and involuntarily, and hid his face in his hands.

‘It’s Uncle Clifford who is dead,’ she reminded him bitterly.

For a second or two he did not answer, but sat still with his hands over his eyes and his elbows on his knees.

‘Is this us?’ she wondered dimly. ‘Is it really possibly Maurice and me?’

Then he raised his head and lowered his hands, clasping them as he did so.

‘Won’t you tell me about it?’ he asked in a queer, flat, tired voice.

It seemed to her that she had to pull her voice back from far away before she could answer him. She spoke dispassionately, like one speaking for another. Indeed that was how she was beginning to feel: ‘This is not us—this is not Maurice and I—this could never happen to us.’

‘He said that you and he had quarrelled—and that it was his fault as much as yours—and then——’ (She had thought she was quite calm—indeed she was—but this strange voice she was forced to use was hampered because of the difficulty of drawing it past the lump in her chest, which was growing bigger.) ‘And then—he fell and hurt himself——’ (she could hardly speak, each word was a painful effort, as though she had been running too fast uphill)—‘and you—went on—and left him——’

‘And he said——’ (She was hurrying now to get the words out before the stranger who had lent her this unmanageable voice should demand it back again, or the lump should grow so large that it stopped the passage completely.)

‘He said he had a little food left——’

Her voice failed. It just died away and left her stranded and speechless, and Maurice answered quietly, ‘It’s true Betty.’

‘Maurice!’ Betty sobbed.

She had not realised that though she knew it was true her heart had still gone on hoping that he

might yet make her believe that it was not—might yet be able to explain it all away and make it never have happened after all.

‘It’s true,’ he repeated, and felt a kind of anger rising in him as he spoke. ‘It’s true—and I can’t—what can I say? There’s nothing I can say.’

‘And you never went back, you never went back!’ she lamented.

‘What do you want?’ he asked her passionately. ‘There’s nothing I can say—what can I do? I’ll shoot myself, if you like—I’ll do anything—I’ll go back and die there—I——’

He stopped suddenly, for he saw himself talking nonsense, ranting and playing the fool, and the sight turned him sick.

‘I’m talking rot,’ he muttered, more to himself than to her.

‘But, Betty,’ he addressed her again, speaking as he felt, from a great distance and across some insuperable barrier, ‘could you—couldn’t you—couldn’t you manage to tell me what he said?’

‘Oh, not much,’ she answered wearily. ‘What I told you—and that he still hoped you might come back. And that I wasn’t to tell Pen. But he told me—because—anyone who could do that’—her voice sank low, to something almost below a whisper, but his mind was so tense that he heard every word without conscious effort—‘wasn’t—wasn’t a person for me to marry.’

‘And you agree with him,’ he concluded simply, as she seemed to hesitate.

‘Oh, Maurice,’ she pleaded, as though needing to excuse herself, ‘how could I? How could we? I can’t look at you now—I never could—without remembering—without *seeing* him left alone there.’

Unfortunate words that pierced and shrivelled up the faint transparency of actual things, showing him the jungle again, still there—always there—as he had seen it.

‘Ah!’ he cried sharply. ‘You see that? But don’t you understand? That’s what I see. That’s what I have been seeing all the time.’

‘Oh, how awful!’ she sighed with horrified comprehension. ‘And you—you knew him too!’

It seemed to her for a moment that to have done this to one’s friend was in itself a more terrible fate than anyone could deserve, but the next moment she recoiled from her pity of the doer to the extreme of horror for the dead.

‘How could you?’ she cried. ‘How could you? Oh, how could you do it?’

‘I can’t speak of it,’ he shuddered; but he had scarcely said it when his decision altered. ‘Yes, though—I’ll tell you—I will!’

He knew that it would hurt, but he felt a fierce, sick need to hurt not only himself but Betty as well.

‘No—no—don’t!’ she exclaimed, frightened either by his change of manner or by the prospect of what he was about to say.

‘I will—I’ll tell you. I must tell you,’ he insisted vehemently.

‘No—please!’ she implored, but some spring was loosed, it was impossible to check him now.

‘It was like this,’ he begin, but his imaginary self-control deserted him as he spoke. He could not tell the story, he could not order or control it. It told itself anyhow, in an incoherent way. ‘It’s like this—it had all gone wrong—everything had gone wrong since Clifford altered his decision and decided to go over the mountains and out the other way. Of course I don’t say our misfortunes were Clifford’s fault, but I thought so then—I’m telling you this so that you may understand——’

(The inconsequent but unbroken flow of his speech reminded her of old Mr. Binks, the village grocer, an old man, beginning to wander in his wits.)

‘You see, everything had gone wrong all along, and we were short of everything, food, ammunition, everything.’

(Harmless, though—nobody minded him unless they happened to be in a hurry. It was his sons who really ran the shop. They were good-natured youths, but must have found him tiresome at times, one would think.)

‘And one of the men—one of the two Malays, the others were Sakai—well, he was taken ill and had to be sent back—and the other had to go with him—that was quite near the start. He wasn’t fit, you see, to go back alone. Then everything went wrong from then on, and one day the Sakai went off and left us. Just disappeared leaving no trace—and there we were, you see—well, and so everything went wrong after that.’

(It was no use trying to stop Mr. Binks talking, to

hasten him or bring him to the point. No use hoping to persuade him to cut out repetitions. One only delayed matters that way.)

‘And I wanted to turn back. There was the way we’d come—well—we’d come it and it was a way, and I thought we might find it back again. But Cliff was bent on going on. He said we had come more than half way, and that the worst was over.’

‘Was that true?’ asked Betty, forgetting Mr. Binks as Maurice began to speak more coherently now that the barrier was fairly down and he was well started.

‘He thought so,’ Maurice answered. ‘I didn’t. Well, of course, I know that Clifford in general was a thousand times likelier to be right than I was. But this time—this time I *felt* I was right—I *knew*—whatever the chances might be that I was wrong.’

As he talked of the past it was with him again and its passions were partially revived. He felt once more something of the eager, angry certainty of which he spoke.

‘It was thousands to one that I was wrong, and yet I knew—*knew* that I was right. And then Clifford—oh, I can’t explain—the thing simply flared up between us.’

Looking back it was like that—an explosion, a springing column of flame and a great blazing conflagration. Such few words as he could remember of their quarrel were stupid, meaningless, wholly inadequate.

‘We almost agreed to part company. We got as far as dividing everything, but in the end I gave in

and we went on. I think Cliff knew I would—we'd had to cross a river, I didn't see how I'd get back over it alone—that seemed to give Cliff an unfair pull—and made me sick. I went on with him—simply hating him.'

As he remembered that old bitterness he tasted it again, and he felt a shadow of the hatred of which he spoke.

To Betty it all sounded like a madman's dream. Maurice—Uncle Clifford—herself.

And yet she had no faintest hope that it was not all true and real.

'You must both of you have been a bit queer,' she commented as he paused a moment.

'Queer—oh, dotty, I suppose!' he answered half mechanically. His thoughts were far away, he was dreaming himself back.

'Well—then——?' Betty reminded him.

He collected himself with some sense of effort.

'Well then he fell down a steep place—and hurt his foot. Damned carelessness, I thought, and made a grievance of it.'

(He said the words 'damned carelessness' as though he thought so still, in spite of the after explanation.)

'Cliff sat there a few feet below me, holding his foot and swearing.'

(Maurice was leaning forward and looking down. He saw the whole thing, and unconsciously half reproduced his own attitude.)

'Then he tried to stand; but couldn't do it. "Well," I said "are you going on or back now?"'

"On," he said, in a rage and as white as paper, "as soon as I can get on my feet." "

Betty had never seen her uncle angry. It was all more remote than a fairy tale, but yet she knew it was true.

'And I answered, "and do you think I mean to come on with you?" I went on to tell him what I thought of him and a lot more. "Curse you," he said, "get on or back or wherever you choose, but clear out of my sight!" "

'And you did?'

'Yes—I did. I didn't see why his confounded foot and his confounded obstinacy——'

He broke off and explained, 'I'm just telling you how I felt then——' But the truth was that he felt it again as he spoke.

'"Very well," I said, "you can go on without me." "

He was silent, and Betty groped in this strange nightmare for something solid that she could touch, for something that could make possible what she knew past any doubt was true.

'You were not yourself,' she reflected slowly.

'Nor was Clifford,' he answered, 'but yet he'd never have done that.'

Betty did not answer; she felt as if that must be true, and yet she knew she did not know. The circumstances were as strange to her as life on another planet.

'Then what happened?' she murmured. 'I mean——when——'

He was re-enacting it all. He looked at her with a blank, dazed expression.

'I came to my senses.'

'Oh, Maurice,' she whispered, appalled by her intuition of his meaning.

'But yet——' she objected breathlessly, 'you didn't go back?'

'I tried to—good Lord—yes—I tried,' he moaned.

'What happened?'

He could hardly answer.

'Lost my way—hell.'

'You tried,' she repeated, 'tried and couldn't?'

'Tried, yes, I tried,' he broke out stormily. 'I don't know exactly what happened. I don't remember. Just nightmares——'

The stifling jungle was all round him again. His saving vision was far off. How could it help him? He had forgotten its existence.

'Did you cross the river?' Betty asked, remembering what he had said before.

'Hundreds of them,' he answered.

'At least—I mean——' he explained, 'that's what it seems like if I try to think about it now.'

'And if you had found him, what could you have done?'

Her words called him back; he answered quite rationally, 'I don't know. I don't know how bad his foot really was—whether he'd sprained it, or broken it, or what. I expect he'd have agreed to turn back if one could get him along at all. That would have been the only thing to do.'

('And fairly hopeless,' Betty thought. She remembered what Maurice had said the day before, 'He'd almost certainly be dead by now whatever I'd

done.' She had realised at the time that he was speaking the truth, and now she understood.)

'Oh, it would have been the dickens of a job,' he added reflectively.

'But did you really mean to leave him?' she insisted, because of the need she felt to understand.

'Don't ask me what I really meant. I thought to myself, "I'll give him a lesson." '

'But you meant to go back? You surely meant to go back presently.'

'No—yes—I didn't mean anything at all. I was simply flaring with rage. I felt I hated him from the bottom of my soul.'

This time he spoke sadly and wearily, he looked back at his past emotions but did not feel them renewed.

'You have been ill,' Betty remembered. Something in his voice had made her look at him anew, and she saw how very ill he had been. 'You must have been ill already when you left him.'

'Oh, I daresay,' he acceded indifferently; he felt momentarily exhausted and drained dry. He was no longer concerned either to defend or to accuse himself.

'I fell in with some natives at last,' he continued his story, 'I tried to tell them what had happened. I remember trying to tell them. But I don't know any Sakai and not much Malay, and I'm just as likely to have addressed them in English or French, or the little I know of German, or even in Latin. I expect I was pretty well crazy. They must have thought I was raving. I don't know how long that

went on—because everything repeats itself as if it had gone on for ever.

‘But finally—I think some other fellow turned up that knew more Malay, and I suppose my head grew clearer as well.

‘I couldn’t make him understand for ever so long *where*—and of course I’d lost all sense of direction and locality—but at last I must have used some word—I don’t know what.

‘It was too late, of course, much too late. I wouldn’t let them touch him or go near him. I got in such a state I think I frightened them. I suppose they thought devils or bad luck or something, whatever they do believe in, must be in it.

‘I just wanted to get away, that was all. They took me out somewhere else—I’d forgotten people would be looking for us. I couldn’t go back to Kuala Besar, and see people that knew us. I couldn’t fetch my things.

‘A Chinese shopkeeper cashed a cheque for me—trusting fellow, I must have looked like the worst kind of tramp—I suppose he kept it a long time, or the bank would have said something. He was decent to me, too.

‘Well, that’s all—no reason to tell you about myself. I’ve nothing left to say. I’ll go if you like—I’ll clear out—that’s what I’ve been meaning to do, but I did see I had to talk to you first. You say Clifford asked you not to speak of this. Well—if you wouldn’t mind—you see there’s mother and Arthur to be considered. I’d not ask anything for myself.’

'I'd promise you that,' Betty declared, 'but it's no use. Penelope knows already; she got hold of the letter. And so I had to tell Arthur.'

'Oh well——' he knew that it did matter, and yet just now he could not bring himself to care.

'Uncle Clifford never knew you tried to go back,' Betty reflected, 'or he'd never have written to me as he did. And even so, he hadn't meant to tell Penelope—or anyone except me—I hope Arthur and I can persuade her to see some sort of reason.'

'Reason,' he sighed, 'oh, she has reason enough.'

'I wish I was dead,' he broke out suddenly again.

He did not mean it, for he felt that death would end nothing, could offer no escape now that his soul was itself becoming the jungle; but yet the word as he used it did offer him a practical suggestion.

'I say—that's an idea. Would she keep quiet—let the others alone—if I was?'

'Oh, Maurice!' Betty murmured, horrified and far out of her depth.

'Well, but what's the alternative?' he asked her. 'Not much, is it?'

'Don't you think,' Betty faltered, 'that perhaps—when she hears all this—she may feel different—as I do?'

'You feel different, Betty?'

They were both remembering how she had said yesterday that nothing Maurice could do could put her off; but neither of them could speak of it.

'Yes—quite different,' Betty answered.

'Yesterday,' he went on, 'I very nearly told you the whole thing. But then Arthur—you remember—Arthur turned up. And all you said—about carelessness and mistakes and so on—I saw you had no idea. I don't know whether I could ever have told you. I meant to; I was saying just now that I must see you, and it was simply that I wanted to see you for. But perhaps I'd never have brought it off. But I'm glad you know—and can still speak to me.'

'Oh, Maurice—is this us?' cried Betty. 'What has happened to us? Maurice—oh, Maurice——' she was half beginning to cry.

'It's no use, Betty,' he interrupted her. 'I mean—you'll see, won't you, what you can do about Penelope? And we'll see if my clearing out will satisfy her. It might, perhaps, there's no telling.'

Whether it was some new conviction sprung from the story he had told her, whether it was pity for what she had seen of his suffering, whether it was her old love for him still alive, something turned over in Betty's heart and she felt it was impossible to let him go.

'Maurice, I *meant* what I said yesterday,' she panted. 'I meant it—all of it.'

'Yes—meant it——' he answered sadly, 'but not now——'

'Yes—mean it—now—always,' she insisted.

'Betty, you can't!' It was simply incredulous amazement he felt, that was all.

'Yes, I can, I do,' she maintained fiercely and obstinately.

'Don't say what you don't mean!' he cried in alarm as understanding and realisation dawned on his mind. 'Don't say anything you can't stick to.'

'Maurice—you *know* what I mean.'

'Betty, darling—I ought to refuse. I can't—I can't—I can't.'

She was still in his arms when, a few minutes later, she heard steps and voices on the drive outside. She started away from him in alarm.

'Quick, Maurice—go away—upstairs. That must be Arthur and Penelope. He's not been able to stop her. Quick—oh, *do* go away! Quick!'

'Go? No, I'd rather stay and get it over,' he answered.

'But do be sensible,' she implored him. 'I've thought of something I can say to her.'

That showed him suddenly and clearly the impossibility of his position.

'No, Betty. Thanks awfully. Why should you fag to say anything? See—it won't do. You can't go through life making excuses for me—and not believing them yourself. Thanks awfully, but I'd rather not.'

'Please, Maurice—please—they're coming to the front door. Please don't let her see you.'

'No—she has a right,' he answered desperately. 'Don't you see? She can't say more than I deserve, or worse than I have thought of myself.'

Betty gave him a glance of helpless, unavailing entreaty, and then fled out of the room and through the front door, which she slammed behind her. Maurice followed, opened the door and stood

holding the handle. He saw Betty run down the steps towards Penelope and Arthur, who were just below. He remained where he was, for he had begun to feel dizzy and sick, and he did not wish to complicate matters by any display of physical weakness.

CHAPTER XIX

AT BAY

'OH, PEN DEAR,' CRIED BETTY IMPETUOUSLY, 'I'VE been talking to Maurice and he's told me all about it.'

She did not know that he was standing close behind her in the doorway.

'He did have a row with Uncle Cliff, but he meant all the time to go back.'

Maurice noted the untruth that he himself had been careful not to tell, but he knew that he must not speak until he had conquered his sense of faintness and giddiness.

'He did try to go back, but he lost his way.'

'Oh, I felt sure——' began Arthur with intense relief; but Penelope's eyes had travelled past Betty.

'I suppose he can speak for himself.'

Both Betty and Arthur turned, and followed the direction of her look. Maurice gathered himself and grasped the handle of the door. He was glad of the actual support, and the feel of the round smooth knob revived and strengthened him a little. To some extent it brought back the sense he had had earlier in the day of the saving presence of the material, the solid, the concrete.

'Did you go away,' she asked, fixing her eyes upon him, 'and leave Clifford alone to starve when he had hurt himself and couldn't walk?'

‘Yes.’

‘He meant to go back,’ Betty expostulated wildly. ‘You did mean to go back, didn’t you, Maurice?’

‘I tried to later,’ he answered. ‘I don’t know what I meant at the time.’

‘Listen to me, Penelope, listen to me,’ Betty implored. ‘He wasn’t himself, he was ill, and they were both blind—mad—with rage. And the minute he came to his senses he tried to go back. He failed—failed because he lost his way—but that wasn’t his fault. He did his best to save him.’

‘Why then, if he was not to blame, did he lie to us?’ Penelope asked dramatically. ‘Why did he say Clifford died of a fever?’

‘I was to blame,’ Maurice answered, ‘I don’t say that I wasn’t!’

‘To blame!’ Penelope repeated witheringly, forgetting that she first had used the phrase. ‘To blame! His murderer——’

‘No, Pen, it’s not true!’ Betty interrupted. ‘If either was to blame, if we can talk of blame—they both were equally so. It wasn’t a crime, it was a most horrible, ghastly misfortune. They were mad! Out of their minds. And don’t you see that if Maurice had come back in time Uncle Clifford would have torn up that letter and never said a word to anyone?’

‘He failed—he lost his way—he fell ill. But he’s no more to blame than if he’d succeeded. And he’s no more to blame than Uncle Clifford——’

She stopped for a moment, panting for breath, and Maurice, who had twice tried in vain to interrupt her, broke in, in his strained, tired voice.

‘No, Betty, that’s nonsense. Clifford would never have left me, and it’s nonsense to say that he was equally to blame.’

‘What can I say, Penelope, what can I do? I’ve killed him—the best man I ever knew——’

‘Clifford didn’t want this known,’ Betty entreated. ‘You read his letter, Pen. You know he asked me not to tell you, you know he didn’t want this known.’

‘You turn his goodness against him,’ Penelope answered bitterly.

‘Against him? No,’ Betty answered, ‘it is I who think of his wishes, not you. He could have told you this, if he had wanted to. You had his letter, and he told you a great many things. It is you, Pen, who will be acting against him, turning against him his misfortunes, his sufferings, his death. Using them for something he’d never have approved. We only want that, now he’s dead, nothing shall be done on his account that is unworthy of him, or unlike him when he was alive. It is you, Pen, you——’ She choked there, and began to sob.

‘And so there is to be no justice?’ Penelope appealed. ‘No justice because he was too good—too kind——’

Suddenly Maurice knew that he would soon faint if he stood there much longer. He had said all he had to say; they could talk as well without him now, and they could find him if they wanted him. Better go back into the house and get himself a drink and sit down.

No one had commented on his departure. No one was particularly interested in it. The centre of

conflict had shifted. The battle was all between Betty and Penelope.

'Then people like Clifford are to be murdered without punishment?' Penelope asked. 'There is to be no justice because he was too foolishly kind.'

'Justice, Penelope?' said Arthur, seeing that Betty was not yet able to conquer her sobbing. 'Maurice has suffered, if that's what you mean by justice, and is likely to still more.'

'But what is it you want?' Betty panted through her crying. 'What are you trying for? Nothing can bring Uncle Clifford back.'

'Ah no—Maurice—Maurice must pay for his death.'

'Oh, but isn't he paying all the time?' Arthur exclaimed.

'They were friends, Pen,' Betty gasped. 'Don't you understand? He was fond of him.'

'And does that make it any better?' cried Penelope, wilfully mistaking her meaning.

'No, worse,' wailed Betty, 'far worse for everybody.'

'But don't you see,' she began again, forcing herself to speak more calmly, 'if Maurice had found his way back in time we'd never have heard of this. He's no more guilty because he lost his way, and he's infinitely more to be pitied. It was an accident. An accident. The most appalling bad luck.'

'You say more than you believe,' Penelope caught her up. 'An accident? Luck? Then I suppose you are going to marry Maurice? When will it be?'

'You pity him, but that cannot alter the fact. Clifford is dead, and dead through him. He is a murderer, but the law cannot reach him, yet justice requires he should pay.'

'Good Lord, Penelope, if you knew,' Arthur began, but she concluded without noticing his interruption.

'Everyone, wherever he goes, should know the story, so that he can never show his face again.'

'*He* knows,' Arthur began, 'and I think——'

But Betty interrupted him, feeling that all he had to say could be no use against Penelope's determination.

'All right, Pen, do as you like; it is with him I side. If you drive him out of the country, I'll go too. Whatever kind of mess you make I'll marry him and share it.'

'Your uncle's murderer——'

'You can say that if you like. I don't know whether people will believe you. I shall marry him whatever happens. Let's go home now. Whatever you decide to do later, come home now. There's nothing you want here.'

She turned to Arthur.

'Fetch your car and drive us back. Let's go home quick. You can send the trap along afterwards.'

'You don't mean it—you can't mean it!' Penelope protested, as soon as Arthur had gone.

'Can't you see I mean it?' Betty answered.

'Yes!' Penelope sighed in amazement. 'Yes—you mean it—oh, why do you take his part?'

Something was leaving her, slipping away from her. Her strength had been that she would see no point

of view but her own. As she became more aware of Betty all her force deserted her.

‘But, Betty,’ she insisted, ‘tell me—why do you take his part?’

‘I understand what he’s been through,’ Betty answered. ‘He loved Uncle Clifford too.’

‘Yes—you pity him. Because you pity him you believe him, and so you will marry him. But pity is a poor foundation to build your life on.’

‘There’s more than pity.’

Penelope shook her head.

‘How can you ever be happy together? How can you ever forget—he or you—how he left Clifford alone to die? Won’t that thought always come between you? You will remind him, he—you—it is impossible!’

‘I can’t help it. I don’t care. That’s what I mean to do. That’s what I am going to do.’

She felt her advantage. She realised that in diverting Penelope’s mind from her main purpose she had weakened the force of her attack. No strategy could have served her better than her plain statement of her own position in the matter.

‘And, Pen,’ she went on in a changed voice, ‘be sensible. Come home now. We can talk about this again.’

She was thinking of her Uncle as she spoke; how he would have hated all this emotional, high-flown rot, and would somehow have reduced the whole matter to terms of everyday common sense. Suddenly the elusive likeness between the young girl and the

middle-aged man that had so hurt and startled Maurice was apparent to Penelope.

‘Ah!’ she sighed, ‘you are too like him!’

‘Come home now,’ Betty persisted. ‘I don’t know what you came here for. I don’t know what good you thought you were going to do.’

‘Home—yes, home,’ Penelope agreed, feeling suddenly very much alone, very small and very weak. ‘I came here to begin his punishment—my revenge—to tell his mother—to tell Arthur.’

‘Oh, why punish them?’ Betty murmured. ‘What have they done?’

‘Why? How could I help it? To punish him. Tell everyone—the servants—the gardeners——

‘But I have lost it all—the thirst and the anger that I had.

‘You are quite right. There is nothing I want here——’

‘Or anywhere else——’ she added, half under her breath.

‘Oh, Pen, darling!’ Betty began, feeling a renewal of her pity for this lonely woman, to whom they must all be so foreign and so strange. And yet she knew that revenge could have brought no satisfaction and that it was better this disillusionment should come before than after harm had been done.

‘Oh, Pen, darling——’

But Penelope interrupted her, shaking her head. ‘But you—no—you must not do that. There is no need.’

Now Arthur appeared again driving his car up to the door.

He saw that something intimate had passed between them in his absence, that indeed he was so nearly interrupting it that his arrival embarrassed them both.

‘I say, Pen,’ he asked, trying to restore some kind of normal atmosphere, trying to speak as though nothing particular had happened, ‘however did you get here so quickly without the trap?’

‘I began to run,’ she answered, ‘and then I walked, and then someone gave me a lift.’

They did not speak again until he set them down at their door, and then Penelope only thanked him for driving them home; but as soon as she was in the house she turned to Betty again.

‘You will repent of this folly, and I hope it may be in good time. You pity him. That will pass, for he will feel less in time than he does now. You will begin to despise—to hate——’

‘I’ve given my word,’ said Betty, simply wishing to end the discussion.

‘To keep me quiet,’ Penelope replied. ‘Well—there is no need. You talk of Clifford’s wishes—he would have thought that price too great. Besides, there is no need. I am defeated. I give in. I believe or do not believe what you tell me—what Maurice tells you. It is all one. I am silent. There is no need for you to marry him.’

‘It’s not that,’ Betty tried to explain. ‘Not what you imagine. I feel he needs me. To leave him now—it would be like what he did—like leaving someone to die.’

‘Treacherous and cowardly?’

‘It would be,’ Betty agreed.

‘And like him? Like Maurice?’

‘He went back,’ Betty answered without anger.

‘I am going back too. And—it’s true what Arthur says—he is paying.’

‘It’s right he should pay.’

‘Well—don’t be afraid he won’t. He is having—he will have—all he can do with.’

‘And you?’

‘Oh, I too, I daresay.’

One last effort Penelope made, but without much hope of success.

‘And Clifford? It was his last request to you that you would break off your engagement.’

‘I don’t believe Uncle Clifford would want me to fail a friend who needs me. I think if he saw him now he would forgive him.’

‘Forgive him? But give him his niece, do you think?’

‘No one gives me but myself.’

‘Ah!’ Penelope sighed, ‘he would be better dead.’

‘Perhaps,’ Betty assented sadly, ‘but that isn’t really to the point. You talk about justice—if Uncle Clifford was dead and Maurice dead, too, what’s the difference between them?’

She left the room as she spoke and went upstairs.

‘I hope to goodness the water is hot in the bath-room,’ she thought.

‘It ought to be at this time of day and time of year. A hot bath—well that would be something.’

Penelope remained sitting where Betty had left her. It seemed to her that there was nothing left in the world now that Clifford was dead and she

had lost her anger and thirst for revenge. Nothing but her grief, nothing but a barren memory she could not serve. She felt that now at last her sorrow was beginning.

Arthur drove back as fast as he dared along the rough, narrow country roads. He was full of anxiety and alarm. He had hated leaving Maurice alone without seeing what he was up to. At the moment it had seemed to him most urgent that he should get Penelope out of the way, but now he began to be terrified by wild fancies of what Maurice might do next. He could not imagine—he simply couldn't imagine—that anyone could want to go on living after having had to speak of himself as Maurice had spoken.

There was something sinister, surely, in the quiet way he had slipped off while the discussion was at its height.

At his age associations are necessarily largely literary. There was Jocasta's silent exit—they had been grouped about the door, much as one imagines the characters in the play.

And he knew exactly how Maurice would do it. He would have an accident cleaning a gun.

Good heavens! Why hadn't he thought of that before? Suppose mother should hear the shot? Suppose she should be the one to find him? He'd probably have blown the top of his head off or something of that kind—

Arthur's speed was by now past the limit of safety in such awkward roads; in spite of the fact that if Maurice had gone off with the intention of shooting

himself he had already had ample time to do it, and it would be no comfort to his mother that her second son had killed himself through reckless driving.

Surely Maurice would think of her—surely the fool would think of her—(Arthur was as angry with him as though he knew for certain that he had not) and not shoot himself about the house or anywhere where she would be likely to hear.

On the other hand, one doesn't clean gun sin the middle of the next field or half a mile down the lane—and one would wish it to appear an accident.

Of course there were other ways of letting a gun off accidentally besides cleaning it. One might stumble on rough ground, or one might do it getting over a stile or through a hedge—

But then as Maurice had never once been out shooting since he came back, or shown the least inclination to do so, the whole thing would look darned improbable however he might choose to set about it. Certainly there'd be no getting mother to believe——

Ill—queer—temporarily insane, one would have to say. One would have to take that rather uncomfortable line of explanation.

Pure accident—mother would never believe that. She'd seen too much of him, and she knew too much of his habits. Other people might swallow it, but she—the only one that really mattered—she'd see through it at once.

Mrs. Forbes, as it happened, had just risen from her afternoon rest, she went to the window and pulled up the blind.

'Oh dear,' she thought, 'I do wish Arthur wouldn't drive so fast; it really isn't safe!'

She hadn't really liked him buying that car. He seemed very young and irresponsible. But it was true, what he had said, that without it they were really too much isolated. Besides, he had promised to be careful.

A horrible atmosphere of tact was spreading through the household. She wondered whether she ought to speak to Arthur about it, or whether perhaps it would make him think her a nuisance and a bore and a fussy old woman!

She watched him take the turn into the drive. Of course there seldom was much traffic along this lane. If only she had been more his own age she could have joked and teased him about it. If Maurice had been more himself she could have got Maurice to speak to him.

She sighed and turned away from the window.

Arthur ran his car straight up to the front door, not as he usually did, round to the garage. He went first to the gun room. Nothing there, and still more reassuring, nothing missing.

He soon made sure that Maurice was nowhere on the ground floor, he was on his way to seek him upstairs when he met Mrs. Forbes coming down. She said nothing about what she had seen from the window, but commented on how much better Maurice had seemed that morning. Arthur conducted her down to the drawing-room, behaving quite naturally all the way, and thinking wildly inside himself: 'Perhaps, just while I am wasting

time like this, so as not to worry her, Maurice is blowing his brains out down at the end of the garden——' No—he knew he wasn't doing that—drowning himself in the well, perhaps, or hanging himself in one of the barns.

Having settled his mother in the drawing-room, he went upstairs again to see whether Maurice was in his bedroom.

CHAPTER XX

HOPE OF ESCAPE

AS A MATTER OF FACT MAURICE HAD DONE EXACTLY as he intended. He went indoors, got himself a drink, and sat down. He settled in the library, because it was on the ground floor, because he liked its big leather chairs, and because it was his normal place of retreat from the world and from his family.

He had forgotten that it was the room next the front door; but soon he became aware that through the open window he could still hear the voices of those outside. As the buzzing in his head ceased he began to distinguish first individual voices and then words.

Penelope said something sharply, then Betty answered, and he began to hear what she was saying. Something about 'guilty' and 'lost his way' and 'infinitely more to be pitied.'

'It was an accident.' He could hear everything now. 'An accident. The most appalling luck.'

Accident? Luck?

This was unbearable. This settled it; if it hadn't been settled already.

It was more than he could stand—more even than he deserved—at any rate it was more than he was able to endure—to go through life with Betty beside him making excuses—lying on his behalf.

They loved each other, and, for a moment, she had made him feel that love was enough, and that everything was possible. But their love was no reason why he should allow her to humiliate him like this. Even a criminal—even the worst criminal—had a right to admit his guilt without having excuses made for him.

He had imagined, when Betty urged him to avoid Penelope, that he was prepared for whatever might come, and that nothing could be too bad for his deserts; but quite unconsciously he had reserved to himself the right not to be made ridiculous, and that was what was happening to him now.

He got up in a fret, uncertain what to do, but certain that he could not sit there hearing all that was said outside. He went out into the hall, half intending to open the front door again and repudiate all that Betty was saying on his behalf. But what would be the use of that? He could only repeat what he had said already. There simply was nothing else that he could say.

Besides, he knew that the feeling of faintness and giddiness would return if he remained standing too long, and physical collapse was not to be thought of. It suggested an appeal to pity. Besides, it would be ridiculous; it would make the thing look silly. Indeed, he could not go out and start wrangling with Betty on the doorstep about whether he had or had not killed Clifford White.

Clifford White—it was ghastly when one thought of him.

He walked slowly upstairs to his bedroom, and sat down on the edge of his bed, still feeling rather queer. He sat there resting a few moments. His head ached, his eyes were tired and hot. He covered them for a moment with his hands, and pressed his forehead with his fingers as though he could quiet its throbbing that way.

Then in the darkness that he had made for himself he began to see—

‘No!’

He threw down his hands and clenched them tightly by his sides.

No, the wall was there, the chair, the wardrobe.

‘The grey wall,’ he said aloud, using speech to support the power of his eyesight. ‘The grey, flat wall. The chair. The straight, dark chair.’ He noted its shape as he said the words. ‘And the shadow of the chair, flat, flat on the wall. And the corner of the wardrobe, the polished corner of the wardrobe.’ Like a prayer or a charm he said the words, concentrating fiercely on his vision.

He crossed to the writing-table, took paper out of the drawer and drew from memory the shapes and positions of things he had just seen. He drew like a child, crudely and assertively, with a heavy, black, unhesitating line.

Before he had finished the drawing he knew that it was wrong in proportion. It was not that his memory had failed him at any essential point; but he was utterly without skill, and had inadvertently altered the scale in the middle, so that the legs of

the chair were too long and its seat too narrow. He threw that sheet down and took another.

He indicated the dark colour of the wardrobe and chair by scribbling backwards and forwards all over them. He outlined the shapes of the shadows on the wall, and then darkened them, scribbling more lightly.

He took his drawing back to the bedside, compared it with the original, made a few alterations in still blacker, heavier lines that dented the paper, and then, fairly satisfied with the result, crumpled it in his hand and threw it down.

‘What next!’ he asked himself. ‘What next?’

Were they still talking, still arguing, as though the facts were in dispute, as though what they said could in any way alter what had happened?

He wandered out of the room and strayed into Arthur’s, which faced the front. No—they were no longer where he had left them, round the front door. He listened, and could not hear them anywhere about the house.

‘Arthur will guess where to find me if he wants me,’ he thought, and went back to his writing-table.

Again he had that curious sense of detachment and control; as though he sat in the air above the figure that wrote at the table, dictating its sentences, reading its thoughts, noting its sensations and pulling the strings that made it work.

‘I must write to Betty,’ he thought; but the necessity was for the one that sat at the table and wrote not for the one that reflected. ‘I must.’

He came straight to the point.

‘I wonder whether you have begun to see that it won’t do. It won’t. We could neither of us stand it. All the same, I’m awfully glad we did think for a moment it might. Love isn’t everything. One has got to live all the time. Moments—like just now—one thinks there’s nothing else, but one has to live, and go on living, and one can’t conduct life all the time at the top pitch of emotion—where nothing matters except love. It’s no use embarking on a thing you know you can’t make a success of. And we couldn’t. We should remind each other too much, and we should always, each of us, be thinking and wondering what the other one was thinking about.’ (It was a hard letter to write—it would be a hard one to read. Her loyalty—her generosity—he must make some recognition of it.) ‘It was wonderful of you to say that. I can’t tell you the difference it has made to me.’

(He did not stop to reflect whether it had really made any difference at all. The phrase just dropped into his mind and he used it with a vague feeling that it was suitable even if not true.)

‘You are too——’ he began again, then crossed out the words so heavily as to make them quite illegible. She was too good for him, of course. That happened to be true, besides being the rather conventional thing to say; but it wasn’t a point it was any use making to Betty. He must be careful not to rouse her pity or her obstinate combativeness. Both those things were grave dangers.

This realisation of her pity as dangerous helped him to see what was the next point he must make

'I think, besides our love, you were feeling that I was in trouble, and that you wouldn't desert me, and that you could help and save me. Well you can't. That's not your fault, but mine. Your help would hurt too much. I've put it right out of your power to help me. Out of both of our power to do anything but hurt the other.'

(He felt he must soften what he was saying a little. Not weaken it but just soften the edge.)

'But the thought of you and the memory of what you have said, that is another matter. You have given me already all the help you can. Any good I ever am I shall owe it all to you.'

(Perhaps that would comfort her a little for all the hard things he was saying. It seemed less ungrateful to make that much recognition of her generosity.)

'I shall always love you,' he added deliberately, consciously saying what he felt to be the correct thing without pausing to consider what he meant by it, if anything; 'All the same for us to marry would be the worst possible thing for both of us.'

'And I think now better not see each other. We excite each other too much, and then we say and do things not to the point.'

He stopped there and read over what he had written. It sounded constrained and cold. Would she understand that it was his weakness that made it so, and his deadly fatigue? That and the fact that he could not trust himself to write otherwise.

'I see now,' he went on, 'that the only thing for me to do is to go away and clear right out. Perhaps

then Penelope will leave mother and Arthur alone and let the matter rest. But whatever she does I see nothing else possible for me.

‘Arthur suggested before he heard anything of this that it might be a good thing if I went away for a change. I shall follow his suggestion and I shall not come back. I shall go on from there somewhere else, and finally abroad and disappear for good. I don’t know what I shall do then. I must take a little time, and grow stronger and think things over. Don’t try to see me. We can only hurt each other.’

He wanted to comfort her. He wanted at least to reassure her about his future; but what could he say? He saw that his departure was likely to distress them all.

‘They’ll begin worrying about me now that I am just finding my feet,’ he thought.

Of course they had been anxious about him all along. But this—the beginning of his struggle towards recovery—this was going to be a heavy blow for everyone who cared about him. If only they could see the matter as he did; but that seemed quite impossible. How could he tell her or anyone of his amazing realisation of the fact that the outer world was solid and aloof, not a mere painted cloth covering the reality of his own mind? And if he could tell them, how could he explain what that had to do with his hope of salvation?

The best things—like the worst—are hardly to be shared.

Like the worst—well, that was a comfort. If she could not understand the nature of his deliverance, neither could she know from what kind of hell he was being saved. . . . And yet he wanted to indicate something, even if he could only give a faint hint of the truth.

(‘Don’t worry about me, I’m not worth it’; that seemed the obvious thing to say, but what was the use? He was not writing to relieve his own feelings, and that would be no comfort to Betty.)

He took a fresh sheet of paper, so that he might not have to re-write the whole if he should find the explanation he was attempting impossible.

‘Ever since I came back, awake or asleep, I have been having the same dream——’

He paused. It was not exactly a dream, the experience he was trying to describe. Perhaps the word was misleading, but he could think of none better and went on.

‘The only difference was that when I was awake I was also conscious in a kind of way of what was actually going on round me, so that I seemed to be in two places at once. Only the other—the dream—was the more real and more continuous.’

He hesitated there a moment. He wondered if he dared put the thing into words—even if he could find intelligible words to describe it. Dared he look at it, as he had looked at the chair, the wardrobe and the wall, steadily enough to set down his impression on paper, so that Betty could read? Could he, in fact, describe a thing that shifted and grew and swallowed him up as he looked at it? A thing

that he actually seemed to feel himself in process of becoming——

There was a queer little brass cat that stood on his writing-table which he sometimes used as a paper weight. He did not know where it came from, it was one of those things that abound in houses that have been many years in the same hands—things without a history—things that have always been there. A grotesque little animal in an attitude of annoyance, with hunched back and arched tail. Maurice's left hand closed on it instinctively, feeling its irregular shape and the coldness and hardness of the metal.

'In my dream,' he wrote in a steady deliberate hand, 'I am back in the jungle wandering in it, and—you know how things are double in one's dreams—I see myself and I see the jungle, and I am the jungle and the jungle is me. My mind can call it up or create it. My mind becomes it. Any minute I may slip away into it——'

(His left hand pressed the little brass cat—he rubbed his thumb over the head—the pointed ears.)

'And it seems as if there was no escape, because one can't escape from oneself, and this is me.

'I feel that what I have to do is to get myself clear of that. To get a hold on what one is accustomed to call realities. To reshape my mind with the help of external things so that——'

(The surface of the cat had an oily feel—some metal polish was it, or merely the heat of his hand?)

'So that——'

(The thing was indescribable, and the search for expression was dangerous, because as his mind dwelt upon it he could feel the beginning of the process for which he could find no words.)

‘So that——’

(He squeezed the little cat until its tail and ears and stand hurt his hand. That was steadying. The self-inflicted pain held him to the present. He looked at himself resolutely, looked into his mind as he had looked at the wall, the chair, the wardrobe.)

‘So that I need not any longer weave a kind of private individual hell for myself out of myself.’

He crossed out the second ‘myself’ and substituted ‘my own consciousness.’

(It had stopped hurting now, presumably the pressure had numbed the nerves. At the same time he was finding it increasingly difficult to write—actually to form letters, words and sentences. It was as though half his mind or more were concentrated in his left hand, squeezing the brass cat.)

‘But allows me to live in the world external to myself——’

(He put the cat down. His hand was stiff and his whole arm tingled. The palm was curiously marked and dented.)

‘And now I am escaping,’ he wrote, ‘from what has been a prison, and I think it’s going to be all right.’

(This was sheer childishness. It meant nothing. He must phrase it somehow—better than that.)

He wrote rapidly.

'I have been transforming my own mind into a kind of hell which is me, and which I shall have to live in forever unless I can get out of it, which I can only do by unmaking it again; because it is myself, and I have found the way and begun to unmake it——'

Arthur did not say, 'Thank God you are still alive,' when he put his head into the room; but that was his first thought, and next he felt a ghastly, overpowering sense of pity and embarrassment at the recollection of what he had heard, and at the thought of what he supposed his brother must be feeling.

'Oh, there you are,' he mumbled guiltily, turning very red. 'I wondered what had become of you.'

Maurice blinked at him in a dazed kind of way, as though one found it hard to get him in focus. 'Where are they?' he asked.

'They've gone.'

'Gone?'

'Yes, gone home.'

('How can he bear it?' Arthur was thinking. 'How can he bear to have me in the room with him, knowing that I know?')

'Penelope?' Maurice asked.

'I think she was quieting down. At any rate Betty was able to take her away.'

Maurice leant his head on his hand. Though he was tired, it was all clear in his mind. He had no difficulty in remembering what he had to say or in

expressing it plainly. Almost he spoke as though repeating some message which he had learnt by heart.

‘I must clear out. I believe my going away may partly satisfy her. You do see, don’t you, that I must go away?’

‘Betty,’ Arthur stammered, turning redder still, ‘Betty said——’

‘Oh yes, I know,’ Maurice cut in with the rapid, strenuous manner of one who has made up his mind and holds it mere waste of time to listen to what the other side may have to say.

‘She said the same to me. Of course it’s awfully decent of her—but it wouldn’t do. We couldn’t stand it really. Not either of us. You must get mother to agree to my going away—make her think it a nice thing for me to do. I don’t mind where I go first. I shan’t stop there long and I shan’t come back.’

‘What will you do?’ Arthur whispered, frightened by his hard, resolute tone.

‘I don’t know yet. Go abroad, I suppose, presently. But I shall write and tell you all about that. I want your help at the start, that’s all. Simply to get away from this house without anyone being upset about it. Can you arrange that?’

‘I think I can. We’d spoken of it already.’

‘I can arrange the rest myself. Presently, I shall write and explain that I’ve gone abroad suddenly for some plausible reason. And I shan’t come back.’

(‘How can he bear to live?’ Arthur was thinking, ‘how can he possibly bear to live?’)

'Shall you be all right?' he asked awkwardly.

'Yes, I think so,' Maurice answered soberly. He wished he could explain why he had reason to think so. He wished he dared show Arthur what he had just written, or that he could somehow describe this morning's vision, and give some idea of its effect on him and its importance. But these things—things that mean most—they can hardly be translated into words; they must be actually experienced. What could Arthur think but that he was queer in his head?

'All right? You promise?' Arthur pressed him guiltily. He felt mean, but yet he could not help his brother to go away if it was simply to be a prelude to an inconspicuous suicide. Though really in Maurice's place he did not see what else anyone could be wanting.

'One can't exactly promise to be all right,' Maurice answered, 'But I'm going because I think it's the best thing for myself. For others, too; but for myself as well.'

Ambiguous—too ambiguous. He might think it was the best thing for himself and for others that he should go right out of the world. Perhaps it was, Arthur thought, but best or worst, he did not see his way to helping with it.

'I mean you're not meaning to kill yourself?' he explained crudely.

'No.'

Maurice felt that a bare 'no' was not enough, but what assurance could he give? Explain that it was no use dying, that death would bring him no deliver-

ance, that he must first finish winning back his soul? That in fact he would, if he died now, be in hell? That would only sound like talk and words and religious convention. To show what he had written would be worse, for Arthur would certainly think he was mad if he read it.

So would Betty.

He took up the sheet which it had cost him such an effort to write and tore it into small pieces as he explained.

'I believe it is the best I can do. Betty would never forget. She'd be ashamed of me and try to think she wasn't. And I—well—I couldn't stand it, that's all. I'd promise not to kill myself, only it wouldn't mean anything. If I got to the point of thinking seriously of that I'd be past caring about a promise to you.'

He looked at Arthur and smiled helplessly.

'You see?' he said.

Arthur nodded.

'Well—so that you can see that at least I'm not meaning to at the moment—yes—I do promise.'

'Thanks,' Arthur murmured.

'I'm writing to Betty,' Maurice went on. 'You can give her the letter.'

'She'll guess I know where you've gone,' Arthur objected.

'Well, tell her if she asks and if you think best. I don't ask you not to.'

He did not think Betty would be importunate after what he had written, but if she should that was his affair, not Arthur's. He had no wish to set those

two at cross purposes. He found himself wondering, in a dazed, impersonal kind of way, whether Betty would perhaps marry Arthur. He was young for her, of course, but that would be less apparent in a few years' time, when Arthur was more completely grown up. The idea was distasteful. He reflected, with a touch of his old irritability, that they would talk about him. To be talked about with forbearance and all that by Arthur and Betty. Oh if only he could be utterly forgotten! They would remind each other—they would think of him.

But a great pity she should marry him because there was no one else about. She had been leading too secluded a life altogether. She ought to see more people. Someone ought to do something about it.

'Don't give it till after I've gone. And—presently—you might see that Leila asks her to stay for a bit and takes her about and all that. Later on, when everyone is feeling better. She's been too much shut away here—all her life, and Pen won't be exactly cheerful company.'

'Yes—you're quite right. I'll tell Leila to look after her.'

'Take her about a bit—and oh you know——'

It was grotesque. It was like the protracted death-bed scenes in old fashioned novels. The one about to die, expressing last wishes for the welfare of those who remained behind. Maurice felt an impatient sense of incongruity—a vexed desire to say something absurd and disconcerting; poor Arthur looked so grave and so subdued, as though in the presence of death.

'Leila's quite intelligent really,' Maurice sighed. 'You must see that she doesn't just turn into one of those hen-women who are always clucking after their chicks. She must be useful to her own generation—she's got the brains. And she can afford to hire someone to rock the cradle——'

'All right,' said Arthur again. Maurice did seem to be making him responsible for a variety of odd jobs; but it probably is part of one's duty to see that one's sister makes herself useful, and doesn't develop into a hen-woman.

'You'd better talk to mother now. I'll finish writing to Betty. Lizzy, of course, will come with me——'

'Oh, of course,' said Arthur with a sudden sense of relief. That was the most reassuring thing his brother had said so far. Surely no one who intends to commit suicide sets out accompanied by a beloved and devoted dog.

'And I should like to go—somewhere—away from here—to-night.'

'Oh all right. I'll see to it.'

Maurice read over his letter again—all that was left of it, now that he had destroyed the last sheet.

'Don't think I am sacrificing myself or anything of that kind,' he added; 'I'm giving myself the best chance I can.'

That didn't sound awfully reassuring perhaps. What else could one say?

'I shall be all right. Don't worry.' Too vague, too colourless. 'It simply wouldn't be decent to you or

to Clifford not to.' He paused again, and then he concluded, 'You understand, this is final. I shall do my best, and I shall not come back.' He blotted the letter, put it in an envelope, sealed and addressed it; and then set to work to pack such things as he thought necessary to take with him

CHAPTER XXI

AN END

‘THAT’S RIGHT, MISS BETTY,’ SAID AGNES, WITH AN AIR of mingled approval and reproof, ‘you have a good hot bath now and go straight to bed, and I daresay you’ll be none the worse to-morrow.’

They had met on the landing outside the bath-room, Betty in her dressing-gown, carrying sponge and towels.

‘Oh but I’m not going to bed,’ she protested, ‘I’m not ill.’

‘No, Miss, and there’s no need to be if you behave yourself sensibly now. But being out all day in your wet things, and nothing to eat since breakfast——’

‘Oh, I shall be all right,’ she interrupted impatiently. ‘And I’d like some tea as soon as I’ve had my bath. I’d like it in my bedroom.’

It was all very well for Agnes to lecture her about past follies, but she had no wish to be kept chilled and half-dressed on the landing while a hot bath waited.

As she lay in the water she began to wonder what Maurice was doing, and how things appeared to him. It had seemed, at the time, that the first essential was to get Penelope home as soon as possible. Well, now Penelope was no longer a menace——But her weariness shrank from the effort of

going back, even of walking to the village, where she might be able to hire something that would take her the rest of the way.

'We ought to have a telephone,' she thought. 'I wonder what it would cost to put one in.' Probably a good deal, as there was none in the village.

'Or else I ought to have a car like Arthur and learn to drive it.'

But after all, things would be different. She would be married to Maurice. What would they do? Where would they live? The house belonged to Maurice. He couldn't sell it, of course, as long as Mrs. Forbes was alive. It would not be possible for him to live so near Penelope. They would always be meeting each other.

But Pen—what was going to happen to her?

Well, she would live on here; she had nowhere else to go. She would have plenty of money to run the house now that Uncle Clifford would be spending none.

She stayed in the bath a long while. When the water began to lose its heat she let some away and ran in more. As a child she had been told that that was naughty, and very bad for one as well. At last, feeling warmed through, she got out and dried herself and went back to her room.

There she found the tea ready and the fire lighted. That was sensible of Agnes—the fire.

She ate and drank as she finished dressing. Warmth and tea and comfort after the chill and excitement of the day brought about an overwhelming sense of drowsiness and fatigue. She could

not, she felt she simply *could not*, exert herself any further.

By making Arthur drive them back she had succeeded in imprisoning herself there. Three-and-a-half miles to the village—it was impossible.

But yet the thought of Maurice prevented her from giving herself the rest that her body and mind demanded. He had slipped away suddenly while she was talking to Pen. She supposed he just couldn't stand it—and really if he couldn't it was not surprising.

'Arthur will send for me if I'm needed,' her exhausted body protested. 'If he can't leave himself he's only got to send the gardener with the trap——'

But, 'Maurice, Maurice,' her heart was crying. He was unhappy, she must comfort him; he was shamed, she must convince him of her love.

Beginning to feel restless and ill at ease, she went downstairs in order to see that Penelope was all right, seeking, unconsciously, some useful reason for being where she was instead of where she felt she ought to be. Penelope was nowhere to be found on the ground floor, so Betty went upstairs to her bedroom.

There she was, sitting by the window, reading. She raised her head as Betty came in. Exhausted she looked—drained dry—old and spiritless and tamed.

'Why, 'Betty!' she sighed, then added bitterly, 'you see there is nothing left for me but religion.' She threw down the book she held as she spoke. It appeared to Betty to be some kind of devotional

work in Spanish or Portuguese or some such language. 'Shall I make a good Christian, do you think?' she went on mockingly. 'Shall I learn to love my enemies?'

'Oh, Pen, darling,' Betty implored, '*please*——'

'Ah, my poor child,' Penelope relented, 'but why will you do it?'

'I love him,' Betty replied crudely; 'surely you can understand that.'

Penelope shut her eyes.

'Love him? Oh no, dear,' she murmured. Then with a sigh she took up her book and found the place again.

'Love him? Oh no, dear——' Penelope's words echoed on in Betty's mind after she had left the room.

'Love him? Oh no, dear——'

'I do—I do!' she told herself with a vehemence that contrasted with the quiet way Penelope had spoken.

She did—she knew she did. Certainly she had known it this afternoon when he had told her his story.

She ought to be with him now—she ought never to have come away—what was she doing here? Why had she left him?

It was when they were together that love was supreme. Their love—that was the only thing that mattered. They ought to be together.

'Love him? Oh no, dear——'

She did not allow herself to realise that her confidence was shaken, and yet she must have known that it was or why should she have felt it so neces-

sary to get back to him, to see him, to feel her reaction and his presence?

They must always be together now, or nearly always. It was when they were apart that they forgot and let one another slip and began to feel doubtful and afraid. When she saw him again her pity—their love—would over-ride everything. She feared their separation—even their temporary separation—as one fears nothing but the truth.

Fool she had been to leave him! So she told herself. Penelope? Penelope could not hurt them. They loved each other, that was all that mattered on earth.

She must get back to him quickly—quickly. She ought to be with him. They must keep together, and then nothing could harm them. They must marry with the least possible delay.

Now—she ought to be with him now! What was he doing? What was he thinking now at this very moment? She must get back to him. They must be together.

She did not confess even to herself the panic that drove her to this conclusion. Without admitting that anything was wrong, she found herself passionately declaring, 'once we are together again it will be all right.'

'All right—it will be all right.'

As she repeated the words her alarm and her sense of urgency increased. The sky outside was dull and overcast. The autumn dusk was thickening rapidly. It would be dark. It would be dark before she could get there.

'I must make haste,' she thought.

Her impulse was to do something, however futile—to run out along the road in the rain—but she restrained herself. She must think of something more intelligent than that. She could send the garden boy on his bicycle to hire a trap in the village.

It was growing darker—it was growing darker all the while. That gave her a sense of the perpetual movement of time, besides working directly on her imagination and filling her with reasonless misgivings.

If the garden boy went that wasted all the time it took him to get there. Borrow his bicycle and go herself?

A boy's bicycle, of course, but she could ride it all right. And no one would recognise her after dark. Not that it mattered if they did, but the unconquerably conventional side of her mind registered for its own satisfaction the fact that they would not. She had not dressed after her bath with a view to going out again—certainly not with a view to riding the garden boy's bicycle—she must change her shoes, and her dress. That was done in a few minutes. The next thing was to find the garden boy. Guiltily she sought him, keeping clear of Agnes; for Agnes would want to talk and raise objections and offer suggestions, and there was no time for all that.

The lamp had to be lit and the seat adjusted—to the garden boy it was a great joke and an enjoyable conspiracy combined. Everything was ready, and Betty was just about to start when she heard

Arthur's motor horn sound as he turned in at the gate.

'Oh there he is!' she cried, darted away from the startled boy, in at the back door and through the house.

'Arthur—I was just coming,' she panted, 'what's happened?'

He did not answer at once, but got down from his seat a little stiffly as though he were cold.

'May I come in?' His tone redoubled all Betty's vague anxiety.

'What is it? Something wrong?'

'No, nothing wrong,' he answered, and then paused. Should he hand her Maurice's letter or should he first explain?

They went into the morning-room. Betty was trembling with excitement; but it was characteristic of her confidence in Arthur that she accepted without question his assurance that nothing was wrong.

'I've brought you a letter from Maurice,' he said. 'He's gone away. He thought it the best thing to do.'

'Gone? Why? Where?'

'Perhaps you'd better read what he says first. Then ask me anything you want to know.'

Betty was fumbling with the envelope which Arthur had given her, failing to open it in her haste and agitation. He struck a match and lighted the two candles on the writing-table, for the lamp had not yet been brought in, and it was too dark to read at all easily without a light.

‘I know he means to be all right,’ he volunteered as he did so. ‘He’s taken Lizzy with him. He’d have left her behind if——’

Betty had opened the letter.

She sat down by the writing-table and read by the light of the candles. Arthur walked to the window and stood looking into the darkness of the shrubbery.

The candles flickered, her hands shook, she could not make out the words. Arthur, standing by the window, was intensely conscious of every movement, all the more so because he was not looking at her. He heard her turn and re-turn the paper, he heard her slightly irregular breathing, he heard her shift her position on the chair.

At first the words ran together, and she could not make sense of what she was reading, but gradually her mind cleared.

‘I shall not come back . . . don’t try to see me . . . this is final. . . . I shall not come back. . . .!’

The faint sound—flip—as the folded letter fell on the writing-table, and the light tap of her knuckles as she let her hand drop on the paper, a deep, sighing breath, and then, quite distinctly Arthur heard her whisper:

‘Thank God. Oh, thank God!’

THE END

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